10 OUTSTANDING STORIES

ARGOSY

DECEMBER, 1959

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THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

MARY STEWART

V. S. PRITCHETT

MICHAEL GILBERT

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ARGOSY

A Fleetway magazine

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ARGOSY Log Book

NOWADAYS there is a new hero in the national mythology—a sort of amalgamation of Prospero, Galahad, and Bertie Wooster. You know who I mean of course: it is our old pal the doctor, who, from the second-rate eminence of Messrs. Syn, Jekyll, or Thorndyke, has suddenly leapt to top-ranking V.I. Prominence. Wherever you look, there he is, on the air, at sea, in the House of Commons, giving his sage, good counsel; and, in between, hitting the high spots.

His love-life is prodigious—why, darn it, they even have a whole new grade of bookstall fiction devoted to doctor-nurse complications—but so, as well, is the time and goodwill he is prepared to spend on his patients. He has an ambience of nature almost amounting to split personality; and that is as it should be. With his patients, all is calm, leisurely reassurance . . .

"Sit down, Mrs. Peckover, sit down. You think those little spots you have on your chest and back may be smallpox? Smallpox, as you may know, is a highly contagious disease, of which there are several varieties, such as confluent smallpox and haemorrhagic smallpox, characterised by fever, chill, headache, backache, and small spots . . . Don't worry about the queue in the waiting-room, Mrs. Peckover, you just relax while I tell you all about smallpox. There will be *plenty* of time for them, plenty." When he has told her all about the cow, that useful animal, and the process of vac-cin-a-tion, he finally gets down to business, in the last line but one.

"If you will take off your cardigan, Mrs. Peckover, a quick examination will show whether the painful spots you are suffering from are really smallpox, in which case I am sure we shall soon be able to put you right." Curtain.

We confess to a longing that once, just once, he would examine Mrs. Peckover a bit sooner, and discover either that what she has is nettle-rash, or that she is a very serious case and, frankly, there is no hope for her; we can't help finding this aspect of the doctor's personality a little too smug to be borne.

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In his relationship with the nurse, however, things are completely different. Here, all is frolic, bottom-slapping, and horseplay with bedpans. In this aspect Doc, though godlike, is nothing like so self-assured, and we now discover that he is still in the throes of his exams . . .

"Sally, I have a horrible feeling that I mucked that ambidectomy in my practical. Did I ligature the lesions? I simply can't remember."

"Don't worry," says Sally, who of course had swapped rosters with the theatre nurse, "I heard Sir Roland say he hadn't seen a better bit of work since he gave his ligature legature."

"Really? Oh, thank heaven!"—and here the doctor-nurse angle slides from obtuse to acute—"Sally," he says, all deep and hoarse, "let's get married as soon as I have my results. With you taking down the telephone calls and helping me, I think I shall *really* be able to tell Mrs. Peckover what's wrong with her . . ." Curtain, and back to where we came in.

Thank goodness he keeps a lavish supply of Argosies in his waiting-room; at least the queue have something to keep them happy while Mrs. Peckover learns the worst.

The sensible fellow has invested in a regular subscription to Argosy (for details of how this can be done, see page 109) and so has no need to risk his patients' displeasure by forgetting to buy a copy at the local newsagent's.

May we remind readers that there is still time to enter for the Argosy Award. Information about this short story Award, designed to help young writers of talent, will be found on page 16. The panel of judges will include well-known writer H. E. Bates, whose *A Breath of French Air* is making bookselling records; Mary Stewart, author of our enthralling serial *My*

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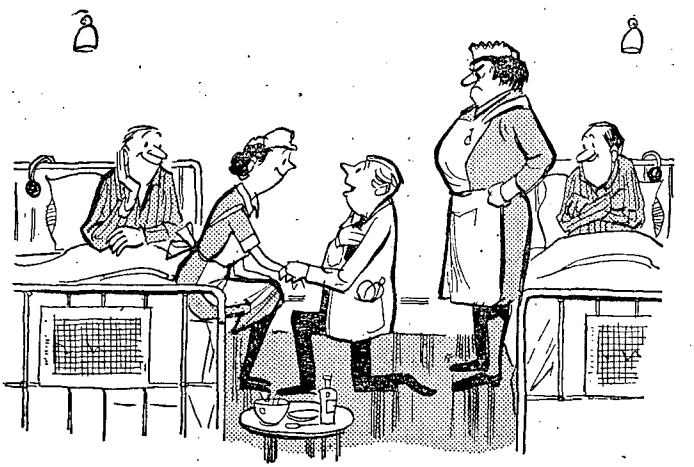
Brother Michael; Enid Love, Head of School Broadcasts in Associated-Rediffusion; John Braine, young Yorkshire author of the best-selling book and film, *Room at the Top*—his new book, *The Vodi*, is due out this month, and the Editor of Argosy. Anybody of sixteen or over may enter, and the closing date is December 31st 1959.

So: lose no time, but borrow a typewriter if you haven't one already, and send us a superb story. Even if it doesn't net the award of £500 there is a special prize of £50 and six more of £25.

V. S. Pritchett, English writer and critic, lives in London near Regent's Park and is a director of the *New Statesman.* Among his recreations he lists: sleeping on and off during the day, walking about the streets, work, reading Russian nineteenth-century novels and short stories. His bugbears consist mainly of noises or their sources: background music, other people's radios, dogs, children with piercing voices . . . There are too many of the latter in his neighbourhood, he says. His critical works include *The Living Novel*, and *Why Do I Write?* (with Graham Greene and Elizabeth Bowen;) recent novel: *Mr. Beluncle.*

Michael Gilbert is back this month with a colourful and uncharacteristic story set in Italy and making use of local knowledge acquired when the author, having escaped from a wartime prison camp, was tramping up the bony backbone of that country.



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A new play of his, *A Clean Kill*, recently opened in Bournemouth, will soon move to London; and a series of detective plays, *The Man from Room Thirteen*, is being televised at present. Mr. Gilbert keeps busy.

Robert Sheckley, who looks like an idealistic young baseball-player, was born in New York thirty-one years ago, and has been reading science-fiction off and on ever since. The off periods include action in the Korean War and fulltime sf writing of what have been described as " cosmically comic stories." Volume titles: *Untouched by Human Hands* and *The Impacted Man.*

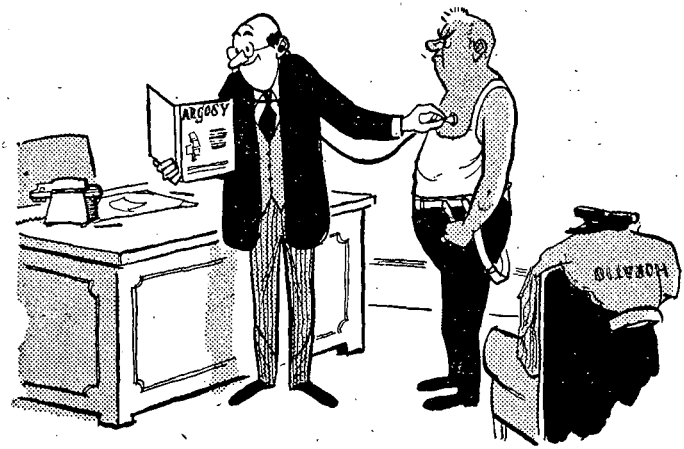
Barbara McIlroy is English, in her early thirties, married to an atomic scientist. She has worked in the technical library at Harwell, at present is devoting herself to three children, the youngest rising eleven months. A story of hers won a place in the festival of the Society of Women Writers and Journalists. Now she's working on a novel; other interests are people, science, Anglo Saxon and Old Icelandic literature, cooking, mechanical devices, and playing the violin: quite a full agenda.

As discerning readers will notice, the emphasis in this issue of Argosy is on wine, women, and song; even the crossword is clued up on these lines and our stories have an extra convivial touch in anticipation of the festive season.

Now, in fact, is the time to stock up, Christmaswise, on some of these commodities, and we hope that we have contrived to put you in the right spirit.

JOHN SILVER

Horatio



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OCTOPI IN THE SKY

Each tentacle held a brimming, foam-topped glass of stout

BY JOAN AIKEN

HOT night. The stars in the velvet sky burnt like sparks on a railway embankment; any moment, it seemed, the whole firmament would be ablaze. The young man, Denis Cobbleigh, lay wretched and sleepless on his luxurious bed; he had flung off the sheets, but the humid dark wrapped him like a cocoon; he had turned off the lights, but the red sky of London glared remorselessly at him through the window.

From where he lay in his Mayfair room, he could see, high over Piccadilly Circus at the top of a builders' construction tower, one of the creations of his fancy, an electric octopus that spun in a never-ending glittering cartwheel, throwing off cascades of light. Each tentacle held a brimming, foam-topped glass of stout.

And underneath, in fiery pink italics, the legend ran (but from where he lay this at least the young man could not see):

For a fast lap—drink Cobbleigh's Cream Stout

Although he shut his eyes he could see it in imagination. He could see, too, its predecessors—the giant squid in the foam-girt saucer announcing, " Every Octopuss prefers Cobbleigh's Cream," or the eightsome reel of octopi holding sixty-four bottles aloft and declaring, " One over the eight? Never, when it's Cobbleigh's Cream."

Denis shuddered. He knew that these nightmare visions of his, translated into posters, into twenty-times-larger-than-life papier maché figures, were abroad all over London. This was the reason why he stayed in and kept his eyes shut.

But that was not the worst of it. He knew, as well, that if he opened his eyes and looked steadily into the corner of the room he would see an enormous glass of Cobbleigh's Cream Stout, darker than treacle, its beaded crusted froth brown as an ear of barley. By the window would be a man-high tankard of ale, and regarding him mournfully over the top a pair of huge cephalopod eyes, sadder than a spaniel's, begging for a drink.

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If he dropped his hand by the side of the bed, like as not he would feel an ingratiating molluscular back rising to rub it . . .

I love little Octo, his coat is so tough
His taste's so discerning, he knows the right stuff
I'll give him eight glasses of Cobbleigh's Cream Stout
And Pussy will love me . . .

"No!" said Denis. And opened his eyes. Above the tankard, above the beaker, the mournful eyes regarded him.

Give us a drink. Please give us a drink! they begged.

"It's no use!" Denis cried despairingly. "If I could, do you think I wouldn't myself?" He dropped his hand. It missed the bedside table, and a smooth curved back rose and rubbed hopefully against it. Angrily Denis snatched up Uncle Dion's bottle of sleeping-tablets.

"If you can't sleep, dear boy, take one of these," his uncle had said, months ago. Every night he took one, but they never put him to sleep. He turned and buried his head in the pillow, to shut out the reproachful luminous eyes, and tried to compose a sonnet.

Greet your green love upon the candled shore . . .

But he could go no further than the first line. Try as he would, his thoughts turned to his uncle, to his uncle's mission the next day in Portsbourne, and without volition his mind began to run in another direction, and to form lines:

Drinking "Tio Pepe,"
Thinking about Rose,
That's the way the evening
Generally goes:
Seven, put the cat out,
Eight, make the tea,
Nine, do the crossword
Or peer at ITV . . .

Irritably he rolled over, kicking the vestigial bedclothes on to the floor. "You won't like sherry!" he threw at the attendant octopi. "It'll make you liverish," and he buried his head again.

Next morning Denis, pale, feverish, but determined, was visiting a psychiatrist. His uncle was out of the way in Portsbourne; it was a golden opportunity.

"You can't sleep?" said Dr. Finlay. He spoke as if it was no great matter.

"I haven't slept for twenty years," Denis explained. "I get all my best ideas at night."

"Your best ideas?"

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"Advertising gimmicks," Denis said gloomily. "I'm in charge of the publicity for Cobbleigh's Cream Stout."

"Ah yes. Drink Cobbleigh's and you're squids in."

"I'm beginning to be haunted by squids." Denis glanced at the floor. A small cephalopod rose from the hearthrug where it had been lying and rubbed insinuatingly against the table leg. Dr. Finlay's eyes followed.

"Do you see it too?"

"A simple case of hypnotism." The psychiatrist's tone brushed this aside. He opened the door, called "Puss! Octopuss!" and gently put the creature outside. "You had better change your occupation."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly do that. It's my uncle's business; I'm the junior partner."

"Sell out."

"Impossible. I owe my uncle a debt of gratitude."

"Why?"

"He saved my life when I was four. He pulled me out of a vat of stout."

"Do you remember the episode?"

"Only dimly," said Denis, shuddering. "I remember a desperate struggle in dark depths; I've been unable to drink stout since that day."

"No wonder," said the psychiatrist with satisfaction. "Very traumatic. We must uncover the whole episode; lay bare its foundations. Come to me every day at ten."

The receptionist showed Denis out. His octopus was waiting for him on the landing, twining itself affectionately on the banisters.

Meanwhile his uncle, three hundred miles away, was being met by a beautiful girl at Portsbourne station.

"Miss Rosita Jerez? How delightful to see you, my dear," he said, beaming, giving an enormous tip to the restaurant car attendant.

"Oh yes, you can *see* me," Rosita said sullenly, "you can *see* me, but you can't talk to me. Mother won't allow it." She looked as if she did not much care either way.

She slammed the rear door on Mr. Dionysius Cobbleigh and his briefcase, climbed into the driver's seat, and jerked the big, ugly, shiny car into motion as if she hated it. She herself, Mr. Cobbleigh reflected blandly, was not unlike the car: big, angular, expensive, and looked as if she had a fast turn of speed.

"Interesting how these old Spanish customs linger on, even after several generations in England," he murmured to himself—

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Rosita was taking no notice of him—and he looked out approvingly at the grandeur of the wild view as they ascended the tree-hung flanks of the gorge.

Far downstream a suspension bridge hung twinkling and spindling in the last gold of the sun. It was a most superior place; a *high-class* place, Mr. Cobbleigh said to himself, suitable for the deal he had come to make.

He smoothed his white hair and leaned back smiling like an evil old saint, silky as an olive-stone, while they entered a pair of high iron gates and drew up before a white Spanish-style house all embowered in trees. Good, very good. A poker-faced major-domo; girl brought up in true Spanish seclusion; the blood of hidalgos; all very good. A long, long way from the dead cats floating in the waters of the Liffey.

"I will escort you to your room," the major-domo announced. "The Senora will see you in half an hour." Rosita had disappeared.

Cobbleigh grinned to himself. This deal was very unlike his last, fifty years ago, when with the purchase of two rainwater barrels and a heap of barley he had started Cobbleigh's Cream Stout on its epoch-making way. Now he was a millionaire several times over, and was on the lookout for tone.

"The Senora is ready for you."

Mr. Cobbleigh followed to a big shadowed room. Venetian blinds and cascades of roses held away the light; all he could see was a black lace mantilla and a pair of very sharp eyes. He prepared himself, with relish, for a hard bit of bargaining.

"So, Mr. Cobbleigh," she said dryly, after the formalities had been observed, "you want to buy my business. You want to buy my Avon Gold."

"Very fine stuff, ma'am," said Mr. Cobbleigh, turning the delicate glass in his hand. As a matter of fact he did not care for sherry, but it was his business to know quality when he met it. And there was quality here all right—in this big shady house, in the well-covered girl who had driven him from the station, in the bony, aristocratic face opposite him, in the aromatic drink he held.

"And the figure you were suggesting . . .?"

He suggested it again. The hard black eyes held a touch of derision.

"It's a failing market, ma'am," said Mr. Cobbleigh, who let neither Irish blarney nor Spanish pride stand in his way when coming down to brass tacks. "And you're—pardon me—getting on. Who inherits when you—?"

"That, Mr. Cobbleigh," said the Senora, "was why I wanted

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to see you personally. You have a junior partner, I believe?"

"My nephew."

"A brilliant young man. Your successor, yes?"

"Oh, the boy's a genius after his fashion," Mr. Cobbleigh said airily. "He's by way of being a poet." His Irishness came out strong on this word, which he pronounced, with some scorn, as phoo-ut.

The Senora nodded, satisfied.

"You met my daughter, yes?"

Mr. Cobbleigh's eyes gleamed. He began to see whither they were tending.

"A handsome girl. An heiress. No expense spared over her education. Private tuition in hockey and polo, to fit her for an English husband. Now she lives in strict seclusion, as befits a young Spanish lady of high family. Nevertheless we have been beset by fortune hunters. I have had my hands too full with keeping them at bay to manage the business properly. I wish her to be suitably settled."

Mr. Cobbleigh nodded.

"Now, your nephew, Mr. Cobbleigh—I might see my way to accepting your *perfunctory* figure for the ancient and noble house of Jerez' Avon Gold if your nephew—"

Mr. Cobbleigh rose. He bowed. "Say no more, ma'am. The take-over's as good as completed. We might try mixing 'em—Cobbleigh's Cobbler, eh?"

The Senora winced.

"Dinner will be at nine," she said, with the graciousness of a tigress to a visiting crocodile.

"Everything in my poor house is at your disposal, senor." Her eyes warned him how seriously he would be permitted to take this as she rose in dismissal.

"My daughter," she said in passing, "could play a considerable part in your advertising schemes; like 'Miss Rheingold,' for example."

Mr. Cobbleigh stayed in Portsbourne for a week, settling details of the merger. Meanwhile in London, Denis was going regularly to Dr. Finlay. Step by careful step the doctor was taking his patient back, through school, through kindergarten, through early ecstasies and disappointments, towards that fatal plunge into the vat of stout.

Midweek, Denis was startled by a telegram from his uncle—Cobbleigh never wrote letters—saying, What the devil's Rheingold? Research, please.

Denis took out *The Ring of the Nibelung* from the library

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and dutifully ploughed through it. Wöglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde, the silvery Rhinemaidens, began to float and dart through his imagination along with the more sober and slow-moving octopi. Dr. Finlay took this development calmly.

"Don't discourage them," he said. "You have to get worse before you can get better. They may bring on a climax."

That night, as Denis lay on his sultry and haunted couch, his waking dream was cleft by a faraway call:

"Weia! Waga! Woge, du Welle, walle zur Wiege . . ."

An octopus, which had lately taken to sleeping curled up at his feet, skittered away, disturbed, and Denis, turning in wonderment, saw beside him a nixie, a sylph with a body as firm, green, and cool as an iced avocado, with upward-floating tresses which wavered as though adrift in an invisible current, with enchanting slanting eyes.

"Wöglinde," she sang, laughing into his astonished face, "Wöglinde and her sisters come to bid you share our frolic. Come! Look!"

She caught his fevered hand in her cool one and drew him to the edge of the bed. Below, in place of Axminster carpet, he saw illimitable depths of green and glimmering dark, shot with luminosity. Two more maidens, laughing and treading water, waited to welcome him.

Denis hesitated no longer. With a clean, curving dive he shot smoothly downwards into the waiting arms of Flosshilde and Wellgunde.

Mr. Cobbleigh was in a baddish mood when he returned to London.

True, the take-over was complete, but the Senora Jerez was no mean businesswoman, and she had bested him on a number of minor points. By the end of the week he had had more than enough of her haughty Spanish ways. A crime to mix her aristocratic sherry with his plebeian stout, was it? He'd soon see about that!

When he found out that Denis had been going to a psychiatrist his annoyance was quadrupled. Denis had never seen him other than benevolent before, and was horrified. His uncle went small and evil with rage, like a venomous toad.

"How dare ye! How dare ye sneak off as soon's my back's turned?"

"But Uncle Dion, the sleeplessness was driving me mad!"

"And isn't that just the way I want ye? Isn't it in those waking nightmares of yours ye come up with hell's own wonderful notions for advertising campaigns? Let's have no more of it."

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Denis, enchanted with the company of his new nightly playmates and determined at all costs not to lose them, had been almost ready to leave Dr. Finlay of his own accord, but this command put his back up; he continued his visits secretly.

Uncle Dion had another shock in store for him.

"Ye're going to be married, my boy—don't scowl at me like that!—to the heiress of Avon Gold. The date of the wedding's set for November, so ye'd best go down and get to know the lovely Rosita. Also she's to be Miss Stout 1960, in a dress by Sacque of Longchamps, so there's work to be done, work to be done. Here's her photograph."

Denis was appalled. "You can't make me marry her!"

"Can't I just? What's wrong with her, anyway?"

"I can't endure that big black-eyed, sulky type." Small and fair, sang his mind, small and fair and green-limbed in the hither-and-thithering waters swim those I love.

"Nonsense! She's a grand handful."

"Anyway, you can't call the girl Miss Stout."

"Now, Denis, me broth of a boy," coaxed Uncle Dion, "ye mustn't throw a temperament on me at this delicate time. I'll strike a bargain with ye—a grand, wonderful advertising campaign from you to celebrate the take-over, and then ye can leave off the pills, take whatever treatment it is ye hanker for, and sleep all ye like. Make up for all the sleep ye've ever lost!"

"*Leave off the pills?* Are they what's been keeping me awake?"

Uncle Dion's eyes slid sideways. He was abashed. He had not meant to loose that piece of information.

"Of all the heartless, sadistic—"

"Now, now, come, come, Denis, me boy. What's a little trick like that in the family? After all, don't forget what you owe me. I did pull you out of the vat of stout when you were four."

"I wish you'd left me to drown in it!" cried Denis with feeling.

The dry, brown summer crept towards its close. The campaign with Rosita as Miss Stout 1960, moved jerkily under weigh. Rosita flung herself into it enthusiastically. She was a girl with unbounded energy. The more Denis saw of her—and there was plenty to see—the more he disliked her.

She maintained an attitude both lofty and proprietorial towards him. He had hoped that she might be put off by his attendant octopi, but she seemed unable to see them.

"You won't mind the fact that I am completely unable to sleep?" he suggested.

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"It gives us all the more time, doesn't it?" she countered, sending him a glance like a sizzling backhand.

Wöglinde, Wellgunde, Flosshilde, come to my aid! Denis called inwardly, despairingly. But the Rhine sisters had retreated as Dr. Finlay's course of treatment inched onward towards its end; only sometimes at night an echo of their silvery laughter recalled his lost delights. Desperate, he turned to his uncle's pills again, but all they gave was a turbid series of images: porcupine, platypus, and armadillo.

He was due for his final session with the doctor on the afternoon before going down to Portsbourne for the official engagement party. Relaxed under hypnosis he had come at last to his fourth birthday, to the trip over the Liffey to his uncle's brewery, to the very lip of the vat of stout.

"I am standing with my mother, holding my sailor hat with its fluttering ribbons. Uncle Dion, who is as drunk as a trout, is dancing on the edge and singing the *Spanish Lady*. He slips and falls in. I jump in to rescue him; I have already learnt to swim in the Liffey, unknown to my mother. My hat falls in, too. Its wet ribbons get in my eyes and scare me for a moment; I think they are an octopus. I pull Uncle Dion to the side. I climb out . . ."

His voice faded away, lost in amazement. "*I rescued him!* He didn't pull me out! I pulled Uncle Dion out!"

With a shout of joy he kicked a small octopus under Dr. Finlay's desk and ran from the room.

Uncle Dion was in Portsbourne already. Denis caught the next train down. His heart was as light as the foam on a glass of pale ale. He was free! He was under no crushing obligation of gratitude! His uncle had been fooling him all these years. What matter a few residual octopi (one was sitting beside him on the seat)? He would soon get rid of them.

Now he could leave the business, he could write poetry instead of advertising doggerel, he could sleep all he wanted, and best of all he need not marry Rosita! He was free!

To prove his liberation from old fetters he went along to the restaurant car, ordered a sherry and a glass of Cobbleigh's Cream, mixed them under the fascinated eyes of the barman, and swigged them down.

"Everybody will be doing it soon," he said. "You may as well get used to it. Cobbleigh's Cobbler. It's a fine drink, too. Makes you won-der-ful-ly drowsy . . ."

By the time Denis left his taxi at El Hacienda he was sleepwalking. He glided like a cloud into the Senora's highly superior party, kissed her hand with a finished grace, and bowed to his

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uncle, who stood beside her like a wicked silver-haired gnome.

"I'm asleep," he announced. "I doubt if I shall ever wake again. I am not going to marry Rosita; instead I have made over to her my share in the firm. Good-bye, my dear uncle. I hope octopi haunt you till you die."

Before any of the startled guests could intercept him, he was out of the house again.

"Stop him!" shouted Uncle Dion furiously. "He's asleep! He'll do himself a mischief!"

They streamed out into the windy autumn night. A copper-coloured moon flung their shadows down the hillside. Far below the little figure of Denis ran kicking its heels and laughing for joy.

"He'll go out on the bridge—he's going! Stop him!"

They raced after him, but his start was far too great. In the centre of the large sweep he turned, bowed again, and flung off his coat. He poised, and dived. A cold sigh of terrified anticipation went up from the watching guests. But nothing, no height, no fall, can hurt a sleepwalker. Down he soared like a falling leaf, and three pairs of green arms rose from the river to receive him.

Whether Denis ever woke again remained a matter for speculation, as he was never seen again.

Uncle Dion perished soon after from a surfeit of octopi; he saw them everywhere, in his bath, in his golf-bag, even in his porridge.

The Senora and Rosita carried on the joint businesses successfully for several years, until Rosita ran off and married a matador.

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"Not that I want to interfere with your methods, but it might interest you to know that I talk much more freely after a few brandies."

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THE ARGOSY AWARD

JUDGES: **H. E. BATES**

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and **THE EDITOR of ARGOSY**

The Argosy Award of £500 will be made to the writer of the best original short story submitted. Argosy's aim is to find and encourage new or as yet little-known writers. The Award is open to all authors (but is not designed for the established professional author.) It is particularly intended to attract young writers. A special prize of £50 will be given at the discretion of the Judges. Special attention is drawn to School prizes.

Six prizes of £25 will be awarded to entries from those at school: entrants of sixteen and upwards are eligible, and are also included within the range of the Award. Books to the value of £10 will be presented to the school attended by each winner. Closing Date: December 31st 1959

All entries to be sent to: THE ARGOSY AWARD,
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Before posting your story please make sure you have complied with the conditions of entry, as set out in **November Argosy.** If you were unable to obtain a copy, a request for full details, together with a stamped addressed envelope, should be sent to:
The Editor, Argosy, Fleetway House, London, E.C.4.

GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD **JOHN COLLIER**
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***In next month's* ARGOSY**

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ALBATROSS

He never had trouble—of any sort

BY GEORGE LANGELAAN

"LIGHTS out already, Anne?" said Donald Parkson. He glanced at his wristwatch and buttoned up his tunic. "Sunday school trippers?"

"No," grinned the hostess, closing the cabin door. "Going home after a conference. It's always the same; some were barely able to crawl up the gantry. Half of them are already snoring. Ghastly plane trip, didn't get a wink of sleep, they'll explain to their wives tomorrow."

"I'll still take a look round. I may not find time in the morning," said Parkson. Tucking his captain's cap under his arm, he stepped through into the long cabin of the transatlantic airliner.

It was strange how he had always wanted to visit his passengers before they settled down for the night and how, somehow, there was always so much to do after take-off that he rarely managed it. He walked along the dimly-lit cabin, and through to the rear. Half the seats were empty and all but one of the passengers had put out their individual lights and were already asleep or at least had their eyes closed.

"Can't see a single light; where are we?" growled a bald little man as he passed.

"Already out over the ocean. Since the weather's fine we're making a beeline for Europe."

"Risking our necks to save giving us breakfast," snorted the passenger.

"No, you get breakfast in any case," Donald Parkson answered with a curt laugh, wondering whether the little man was joking or not.

"I agree, you should have a pretty quiet night, Anne," he said two minutes later as he changed his tunic for a zip-fastened jacket.

"Yes," said the hostess, preparing cups and a tray.

"Any coffee, Lady Anne?" The navigator had poked his head into the tiny kitchenette.

"In about five minutes, Tom." The head disappeared.

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"Why do they all call you Lady Anne?"

"Because of the way I handle the passengers, I think. Why do they call you Lucky Parkson?"

"What's your guess?"

"Because you're lucky, I suppose. Well, why shouldn't I be a lady, then?" said the hostess, chuckling. "You know, Lucky, I'm sorry this is your last trip."

"So am I, in a way. But I know someone who isn't, though."

"Peggy? Yes, I know. I would never marry a pilot."

"No pilot could afford it, Lady Anne," butted in the flight engineer as he emptied a bowl of cube sugar into his pocket. "Apart from the company uniform, the only thing that fits you is a mink coat. This really your last trip, Lucky?"

"Afraid so, Al. The age limit has caught up with me."

"How many times have you crossed?"

"On this particular line and flight, this happens to be my one-thousand-and-first crossing."

"And how many close shaves?" asked Anne, pouring out a cup of coffee.

"Believe it or not, none."

"Commercial flying, yes; but during the war?"

"That's where I got my nickname. I've been flying for almost twenty-five years, first in the R.A.F., then commercial in most parts of the world. I have never once had trouble of any sort."

There was a long buzz as one of the markers flashed red on Anne's call-board.

"Twenty-one. That's the old boy who was worried because he couldn't see a light. Now I've told him we're out over the ocean he's probably worried because he *can* see a light. Run along and tell him there are still ships floating around. I'll take care of that," said Parkson, picking up the tray and carrying it forward.

Sitting by his little table, the flight engineer was reading a detective story. His four engines had been reduced to normal cruising for almost an hour; they were roaring smoothly and belching bluish streaks into the ice-cold darkness. In about two hours' time he would switch fuel tanks. Meanwhile, there was nothing to do but listen and throw an occasional glance at his control dials—a mere confirmation, for his ears always warned him of anything unusual before any dial needle so much as trembled away from normal.

In his corner, the navigator was drawing a blue pencil line on a chart, a blue line that followed very exactly an ink line that had been drawn in before.

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Facing him, the radio operator was scribbling on a pad.

"Weather?" queried Parkson, putting down a cup of coffee.

"Yes. Seems to be thickening a little ahead, but nothing to bother about."

"Thanks," smiled Walker, his co-pilot, seeing him with the tray.

"All quiet?"

"All quiet, Lucky," Walker said, stirring his coffee as the automatic pilot gently moved the stick between his knees. "Aren't you taking your nap?"

"Not tonight, John. This is my last trip and I'll have plenty of time to rest after that: attending business lunches or dictating rot to a secretary in the office."

"That's the sort of thing my missus has always dreamt of. Seeing me off every morning, with bowler hat and umbrella and just enough time to miss the eight-sixteen."

"Yes, I know. Well, when you reach that stage, I shall be at the last but one, retired and taking my daily walk as far as the local. By then, of course, our youngsters will be piloting Mars and Venus liners."

Having finished his coffee and taken the tray back to Anne, Lucky Parkson stretched, clambered into his seat, pulled the belt tight over his hips, and drew out an old-fashioned woollen bonnet before pulling the intercom earphones over his head.

He studied the chronometers, the compass, and each of the seventy-odd dials above, in front of, and below him, and then settled down comfortably.

"John, you turn in if you like. I'll have you called if I need you."

"No, thank you, Lucky. I'll have a little snooze here if you don't mind," said Walker, pulling a cashmere scarf up round his ears.

Captain Lucky Parkson rarely took much rest when in flight. He had, however, made a habit of turning in for an hour once they were well away and out of traffic lanes when the weather was good. He was always up and in charge at the approach of dawn when crews get tired. Except for practice runs, he rarely allowed his co-pilot to bring her in or take off. Not that he did not trust him—he knew Walker was as keen and good a pilot as he was himself—but he felt it was his duty.

It was really amazing that his luck should have held throughout four years of war and twenty years of regular flying. In a way, it could scarcely be called luck; it was in fact a total absence of any sort of ill-luck. Except for the nine times he had gone into action against enemy aircraft, all his war missions had been the

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same. Even in those nine battles, the enemy fighters had somehow never got close enough to line him up in their sights.

He and his brother Bill had been known as the Lucky Brothers. But Bill's luck had been different, the real sort—at least while it lasted.

There was the time when he had come back with part of his Spitfire shot away and a wing on fire; when, after crashing through a couple of hedges, it had settled in just enough mud to put out the fire but not enough for Bill to drown.

There was that other time when, after being shot down over the Channel, he had come down through the smoke and fishing tackle of a Grimsby trawler that had no business there anyway, and landed with a shout in a hold full of fish.

They preferred to fly together. On take-off and in flight Donald had only to look over his left shoulder to see Bill nod and wink solemnly, a thing they never failed to do if they were about to break formation.

In flight he had several times warned Bill that he was being followed. "Thank you, dear brother," Bill would answer over his mike and, with a solemn wink, he would suddenly dive or swing into evasive action.

It was evident that neither of them would have married Peggy had their luck held.

They had been together when they met her at a local dance. They both flirted with her and Peggy had never seemed able to make up her mind which she preferred. Although both knew well that the other was really smitten, they had never pushed the matter further than a simple flirtation.

Lucky Parkson often thought of that bright autumn morning when Bill's luck had bowed to Fate and the Angel of Death. Bill's perspex canopy had turned a bright yellow as oil flowed over it.

"Bill, are you all right?" he had shouted over his microphone.

"No—sorry, old boy," Bill had answered calmly. He had pushed back the canopy and, with a last wink and the usual solemn nod, slumped forward. His burning machine streaked down towards a wood, all rust and gold in the morning haze. For a long time, Donald had flown round the thick column of smoke belching from a black hole.

The sky was quite empty when he had at last turned west towards England where he was forced to crash-land on top of a cliff, out of fuel.

Later—a good deal later—he married Peggy. They had been happy together and both were proud of their two children. But being the wife of a pilot was a strain at times and though Peggy

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had never complained, he knew she was relieved there would be no more flying.

"More coffee, anyone?" asked Anne.

"No, thanks," Parkson grinned. Walker snored softly.

The shiny black lacquered windscreen turned grey. It could not be dawn and, a moment later, when drops began streaking up it, he knew that they were catching the bad weather sooner than expected.

Parkson checked all his instruments and again looked up. His eye noticed something white. Cloud, he thought, switching on the powerful windscreen wipers—he hated the idea of not being able to see ahead, even if there was nothing to see—and again something white flashed.

Parkson rubbed his eyes, turned off the cabin light and carefully examined his instrument board. The dials glowed a soft blue. Then slowly he raised his eyes to where the windscreen wipers were flicking rapidly. There *was* something white ahead.

He had already slipped his feet into the controls and was about to touch Walker's shoulder. Yet it could only be a cloud. Leaning forward, his hand groping for his night glasses, he tried to see better. It looked like a great bird, its wings moving up and down as though flying ahead of him in the same direction.

Donald knew that he was being ridiculous but, instead of grabbing his night glasses, his left hand slid up to the searchlight switch. He would see millions of diamonds rushing towards him, sparkling raindrops, and he hesitated because he knew that for some seconds after he would have difficulty in seeing through the blackness of night. Leaning forward, holding the switch between thumb and forefinger, he waited a few seconds, then flicked it on.

In the shaft of rushing raindrops straight ahead he saw a great white bird.

It was impossible, quite impossible! He knew very little about birds, but even if a bird could travel at that altitude over the Atlantic, it could not possibly fly at such a speed. The aircraft would have overtaken and killed the bird even before he had time to see it properly.

Again he looked. There was no possible doubt. A white bird was flying swiftly and strongly straight in front.

"Walker!" he snapped, grabbing the controls and pressing his thumb on the button to disconnect the automatic pilot.

"What's the matter?" said Walker, sitting up very straight and adjusting his earphones as he tried to see what Parkson was looking at.

"That bird, look!"

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" Where? Good lord! " gasped Walker as the bird suddenly swooped down and, rigid as a statue, Lucky Parkson slowly and firmly pushed the stick forward and followed into a dive.

" Hi! " shouted Walker.

He grasped the controls and pulled violently. " Lucky, have you gone crazy? "

The whole machine lurched sideways as, with a tearing crash, something seemed to hit the tail.

Deftly checking a roll that put them over to the right, Lucky was now sitting well back, pulling at the stick. Things had crashed behind him. Hanging on with both hands to his control-board the flight engineer watched his four pets, the engines, who were holding out beautifully.

" Shall I get on the air, sir? " asked the radio operator, scrambling to his feet.

" Yes; but no Mayday until I say so."

" Yes, sir."

" Walker. She's flying. Go and see what happened. Something hit us back there. Tell Anne to prepare for an emergency," he added, switching on the NO SMOKING—FASTEN SAFETY BELTS panel.

" Captain."

" Yes," snapped Lucky over the intercom.

" I am on the air with cargo flight X-one-one-three going west. They say they have just grazed an airliner that managed to avoid a head-on collision by diving."

" Are they all right? "

" They think so. They want to know if we are."

" Tell them we think so, but ask them to make one or two slow turns. I am doing likewise. Give them our altitude: six thousand five hundred. Make sure they are at least five hundred feet above or below us. One close shave is enough for the time being."

A minute later, Lucky was able to see the lights of the cargo plane.

" At least we won't be quite alone if we do have to ditch here," he said, pointing as Walker leaned over his shoulder.

" No visible damage, Lucky. Anne has the situation well in hand now. They were jittery until she threatened to beat up a little man who wouldn't take off his shoes."

" Good for her. Anyone hurt? "

" Only Anne. She got a cut over her nose."

" Engineer," called Lucky over the intercom. " Are you happy? "

" All fine, sir."

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" Navigator. Know where we are? "

" Seven hundred miles west of Shannon."

" Radio. Our cargo friend all right? "

" He thinks so, sir."

" All right. Tell him we are resuming our flight if he agrees. Then report the incident to Shannon and ask them to prepare for an emergency landing in about an hour and three-quarters from now, if all goes well."

A very nasty air pocket that caused some minor damage was the only explanation the passengers were able to worm out of Anne. Oh no, they had not hit the top of a mountain. Yes, they had dived unexpectedly. Yes, they would be going straight on to London after a routine check. Yes, unfortunately, they would be a little late.

No, not more than an hour, if that. Yes, breakfast would be coming up shortly.

Instead of dispersing after the usual formalities, the crew had taken Lucky Parkson to one of the company offices where some twenty people were gathered round champagne bottles to celebrate his last flight as captain and, for the few who knew, to congratulate him once again on his luck.

" Tell me, Lucky," asked young Walker as he lit his cigarette, " what made you dive just in the nick of time? You woke me up a second before and though I craned my neck I couldn't see anything but sheets of rain."

" Well, I thought there was a bird."

" Oh come off it, what else? "

" Luck, I suppose," said Parkson, grinning sheepishly . . .

Three hours later, Lucky Parkson blew the hooter of his sports car as he swung round the corner of the sea-front road. He saw his son and daughter run out of the cottage to open the double gate and swing on it as he drove straight into the small garage by the kitchen.

It was not till after tea, when the children had gone to a party and he was sitting in his favourite deck-chair, that he lit his pipe, looked out over the sunny white-capped sea, and said between puffs, " D'you know, Peggy, we very nearly had it last night. A real close shave."

" Oh, Don! What happened? I thought it was the weather that had delayed you this morning. That's what they told me on the phone."

" Yes, I know. Truth is we collided with a cargo plane and my rudder was a little damaged."

" No! "

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" Yes, and if I hadn't put the ship into a dive it would have been a head-on coll— Where the devil did that bird come from? "

" Oh, how strange! We haven't seen it for two whole days. It has been coming every evening for over a week now, and the children feed it. They love it. Colonel Brandham says it is an albatross."

" An albatross? "

" Yes. The children call it Bill. Oh—you don't mind, do you, dear? Perhaps I shouldn't have let them."

" Don't be silly, Peggy," said Parkson. " Of course I don't mind."

He got up from his deck-chair and walked slowly towards the huge white bird. It solemnly winked a bright yellow eye and took off with a great flapping of wings. © George Langelaan 1959

★ ★ ★

ORDERS OF THE BATH

The Prince wanted a chef for the Paris season, my father agreed to lend him Bouzy, and on the first day in his new employment, Bouzy was called in the morning by a smart maid who told him that his mistress was ready to give him his orders.

The maid showed him down a long corridor and through a suite of apartments which included a luxurious sitting-room and a bedroom with a vast canopied bed, and ended by opening the door of a final room with the announcement: " Madame, here is the chef."

Bouzy had taken it for granted that he was being shown into the Princess's dressing-room, and his confusion was pitiable when he realised not only that it was her bathroom, but that she was lying in her bath. True, only her head was showing, but Bouzy might have remained tongue-tied indefinitely if the maid had not had the tact to stay at his side for a moment and to whisper an encouraging: " Madame always gives orders from her bath," before she made off.

His new mistress's first instructions were almost equally surprising to a Frenchman accustomed to begin the day with a simple meal of coffee and *croissants*, and to look on it as anything but a social occasion.

" Breakfast is a simple matter," the voice from the bath began calmly. " There shouldn't be more than a dozen guests, and all you will have to think of will be one or two new ways of serving up caviare and *balik*."

MADAME PRUNIER, *La Maison*

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KEEP WELL BACK

My loving bride tried to get over the railings

BY PATRICK RYAN

IT was a long time ago when talking pictures were as rare as colour television and the streets of London were full of live entertainment, that my life got me working alongside an eight-foot petrified giant.

My troubles hit a peak the day Johnnie Morpho asked me to visit him. Big Tony and Banger Frick brought the invitation, and showed their chivs and brass knuckles as credentials. Bookmaker, little Cæsar of the dog-tracks, and general dealer in mayhem, Johnnie Morpho was King of the Old Kent Road at that time.

Evie, his current donna and a well-stacked redhead, was draped along the settee in his office. Once she and I had beaten out the odd good time together. She gave me the old eye but I looked strictly the other way. Johnnie was sore enough at me as it was.

"I've given you plenty of time but you ain't paid me a stiver off the forty-seven quid you owe me over Charlie Quickly."

If ever a dog was ill-named, it was that cripple.

"I've not been making much, Johnnie—"

"You two did all right at the mushroom racket, I know. But you didn't pay your debts, did you? You sloshed every penny on that fat little blonde up at the Empire, didn't you?"

And that fat little blonde had left me flat when she heard the mushroom boom was over and I was broke.

"I'm giving you a last chance, my twisting sonny boy. You pay up by the end of the week or I'll be taking it out of you in ears."

Half past nine that night, and I was studying ways and means in the Boar's Head when in comes his Evie, drunk as any duchess. "Hullo, bright eyes," she chuckled. "I've been looking for you—"

"Now you stay away from me, Evie. I've got troubles enough."

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"So. You don't like me any more?" She pouted like a panther.

"Sure I like you, Evie, but my throat can't afford you. Johnnie's liable to cut the head off any Romeo who tangles with you. So just be a good girl and I'll get a taxi to take you home."

"I wanna have a good time."

Directly we got outside she slumped and I had to put both arms round her to keep her up.

"That's better," she murmured and started in kissing. She was hot potatoes, that Evie, and it seemed a pity to waste her. We were smooching away when suddenly Johnnie Morpho's white car came round the corner.

Evie, all female quick wits and self-preservation, came suddenly to life. "You bully, keep your rotten hands off me!"

And she slapped me in the puss, yelling blue murder and fighting away like Lucrece. Her handbag fell open and pound notes fluttered to the road.

"All right, Evie. I'll fix the rat." Morpho and his bunch came running across the street. Evie burst into tears.

There wasn't going to be any time for logical explanation. Forty-seven quid and now molesting his moll! I went off hell for leather down the Old Kent Road. They were big but I was fast and I'd opened up quite a lead by the time I got to the entrance of Tooley's Fairground.

The steam-organ was blaring, lights flashing, roundabouts spinning, girls screaming, and all the fun of the fair was bubbling up into the night as I made my way through the crowd and across to Joe Tooley's caravan. Joe was no friend of Morpho's and he owed me a turn, too. He was drinking whisky with a small sad man who was holding an ostrich-plume headdress and a tatty-looking leopardskin.

"What's the hurry, son?" said Joe.

"Morpho's boys are on my tail. They find me and I'm dog-meat." And I told him the rest.

"You never learn sense, do you? That Evie's poison. A right old yarn she'll have told Johnnie by now." He peered through the side of the blind. "His boys are everywhere outside, looking for you in the crowd. And they'll have the place covered when you turn out."

"Can I lie low here for a bit?"

"Please yourself. But I can't stop them searching the vans. You're in a right spot, boy." He pondered a moment. "But maybe I've got an idea. Perhaps you've landed here just at the right moment. Meet Monty Timber of Timber's Wonders of the World."

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I shook hands with the sad man.

" Monty runs a sideshow—a rubberneck walk-through—and he's arrived tonight to do three weeks with me. He's got a mermaid, a monster rat, a giant, and a Wild African Chief. Or rather, he had an African Chief."

Timber shook his head lugubriously.

" The finest one I ever had. Ringo, his name was, A huge dark man from the Cameroons. I found him in Tiger Bay. Not too bright up top, I'll grant you, but real fierce and regal done up in his togs. If he'd been a bit smarter he might not have got pinched in a pub fight last night. People cut up all over the place, there was, and he'll get six months if he gets a day. And me left with the Wild African Chief, grandson of Chaka the Great, spread in five colours all over my entrance banners."

" Well, there you are," said Joe, pointing at me. " Sent from heaven. Big enough and ugly enough—just the job. Black him all over and do him up in the old leopardskin and feathers, stick a spear in his hand, and you've got yourself a new African Chief, Monty. You can act a bit barbary, can't you, son? "

" Well, yes—but—"

" You ain't got no time for buts. Big Tony'll be in here any minute now. The only chance you've got is to black up, lob on the ostrich, and go over to Monty's van like you was the boy from the Cameroons. You can lie low till we see how the land lies. You'll have a safe hideout and be earning a bit off that forty-seven quid as well. What more do you want? "

It seemed the only port in my particular storm, so I took the tube of face-black from Timber and clamped on the plumes.

Big Tony and the boys scratched all over the fairground that night, but they never looked twice at the dark warrior kipping down beside the mermaid tank. They were still prowling around when the show opened next day and they posted a couple of sentries at the gates. By that time, Monty had me blacked all over with his special mixture.

" This'll keep you a good dark brown and water won't affect it. It's my own formula and it'll save you messing about with make-up every day."

There were just the four of us humans on Monty's staff: himself as front-man and artistic director; Mrs. Timber as the mermaid; Luke, a large bruiser, as general factotum, and me. The show was the usual fiddle, but it gave the mugs a laugh and most left contented.

Outside was the platform where Monty made the spiel and

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took the money. It was backed by big painted banners featuring the Tallest Man the World Has Ever Seen, and beside him the Wild African Chief, who was pictorially engaged in spearing a lion with his right hand, while straight-arming a tiger with the shield on his left.

"Inside these walls, ladies and gentlemen," Monty would chant, "you will see wonders never before revealed to human eyes in the Old Kent Road, marvels which have stopped the breath of all the Crowned Heads of Europe. Not only will you see the Tallest Man Who Ever Walked This Earth, eight feet four and one-half inches measured by the Astronomer Royal himself last week, but you will also see the Largest Rat In The World, the Monster from the Sewers of Paris, the Rat that eats Cats . . ."

And you'd file inside past a series of canvas cubicles in which you would see the Rope That Hanged Crippen, Charlie Peace's Cosh, the Brides' Bath, and other relics of popular assassination. Next, the Giant Rat—a twenty-pound South American coypu like all such sideshow monsters—humped and dismal, eating a turnip. And then Rudolf, the eight-foot petrified giant. Monty claimed he was a German prodigy who fell in the River Weser and got petrified. Rudolf was all of eight-four-and-a-half in his calcified socks but goodness knows what he was made of. He was solid as marble, white-faced and staring, and he rang dully if you hit him with a hammer.

Mrs. Timber lay in the dry glass compartment of the mermaid tank, her legs inside a fish-tail, and a mother-of-pearl mask on her face. Years ago she used to show her maiden features, but she wore the mask now because of the wrinkles.

And lastly, up on a little stage of my own, seated on a tomtom beneath a rubber palm tree would be me, the Wild African Chief, Grandson of Chaka, chained by one leg and brooding for my native kraal.

"I must ask you, ladies and gents," Luke would say, "to keep well back from the railings. 'E is wild and proud and 'aughty and 'e'll 'ave you on the end of 'is hassegai as soon as eat 'is dinner if 'e reckons anybody is taking the mickey . . ."

I just sat there, silent and disconsolate, and although Monty was well satisfied with my performance I got bored with it after a couple of days. So I set about livening up the act a bit. Having lately read *King Solomon's Mines* and *Prester John*, I was equipped with a few Zulu words such as Umslopagaas, Ignosi, Gagool, Inkolondo, and Umbopa. I worked them into a homemade harangue and delivered it at my public as a condemnation of the hated white man.

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They seemed to like it, so I added a war dance, a bit of Basuto soft-shoe shuffle with cha-cha overtones, and also a wailing Hottentot death chant freely adapted from the *Indian Love Call*, and worked myself up a real production number. At the end I'd drink raspberryade from a coconut shell.

"And now," Luke would add, " the Chief restores his strength by drinking blood. In 'is native land 'e would drink the blood drained through the ear-'oles of 'is dead enemies, but in this country we 'ave to be content with bullocks' blood . . ."

The suckers lapped up this corn, and by the fourth day I was the biggest attraction in the show.

" Great stuff," said Monty. " The take's shaping up to be the best we ever had."

Towards the end of the week I even had some regular fans and, chief among them, I noticed a dark woman, a hefty wench with a grin like a split melon.

Twelve times in two days she paid to come in, and each time she was clearly pleased to see me.

The next evening I was walla-wallaing away in my stump speech when she waved an umbrella and started talking back at me in a strange African tongue. I didn't know what she was saying but she was obviously on my side, and since the conversation was powerful proof of my authenticity to the rest of the spectators I played it along from there.

Dropping my usual gabble I waved to her, smiled happily back, grunting and nodding affirmatively or shaking my head according to which answer seemed to please her best. In this way I gave the impression that we were conducting a spirited conversation in her language.

She talked for five minutes with mounting delight and then did a little dance before the railings.

I did an exhibition buck-and-wing in polite return.

Everyone clapped and she came up to the stage holding out her hand. I gathered that she wanted the spear so I gave it to her. She chortled with glee, banged it three times on the floor, gave it back to me, and waddled, singing, out of the booth.

A couple of days later, my hefty African fan turned up with about twenty of her compatriots, both men and women, all in their Sunday best.

" Lovely business," said Monty. " She's bringing all her friends to see you. A real breath of home you must be to her."

An old man with curly grey hair bowed and handed an envelope across the railings. I grunted questioningly.

" You talk English," said Monty to him. " Great Chief understand English."

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"This woman," said the old man, pointing to my No. 1 fan, "she say you fine-looking, beautiful man."

I grinned happily.

"She say she like you very much. That is why she come every day to talk with you."

I kissed fingertips to her.

"She very happy woman," went on the spokesman, "because you say you love her like she love you. And she pleased for me to give you this paper."

I took the envelope.

"What is it?" asked Monty.

"That paper, marriage contract for Chief to be husband of this happy woman."

She did her little dance again and banged with an imaginary spear. Her mates cheered.

"Marriage contract!" I said. "I never said I'd marry her."

The cheering died away ominously.

"She say she ask you according to laws of the Bolongo tribe. She say three times she love you. She ask three times if you love her. You say yes, yes, not half, three times. She do bridal dance for you. You dance yes-yes for her. She ask you to marry her three times. You give her spear in answer which means you take her without dowry. She hit three times. You say yes-yes, not half, and that mean you promise to marry her in three days."

My loving bride tried to get over the railings to me but I clobbered her back with the blunt end of my assegai.

"I didn't know what she was talking about," I said. "I don't want any marriage contract."

I tossed back the envelope which fell at her feet. She began leading off, and Luke had to hold her or she'd have been in there after me, assegai or no assegai. I got behind the rubber palm tree, as far back as the chain would allow, and put my shield up in front of me.

"Get them out of here, Monty. This ain't in my contract."

The old man held up a hand for silence.

"You make promise according to tribal laws to marry this happy woman. You break promise and you bring great shame to her family and to Bolongo tribe. Her brothers, her uncle, they not like that. Her twin brothers, boxers, fighting in Liverpool tonight. Tomorrow they come back. If you not marry this happy woman they likely beat your head off. Her uncle come too and he very quick man with knife."

Luke and Monty got the wedding party out in the end. The spokesman turned at the door. "Tomorrow, you make marriage

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contract or else—" He slit his throat with an imaginary knife.

I tossed down the shield and slung off my plumes.

" That's my lot, Monty. Your Wild African Chief is asking for his cards."

" Don't be hasty, boy. You've put us all on the gravy train with your interpretation. We can't let you chuck it now the lolly's rolling in."

" It's all right for you. You take your cut and I take the risks. If I don't get out by tomorrow, I'm going to be decapitated by two big black boxers."

" You're pessimistic. We'll find a way round."

" You could always marry the girl," said Luke.

" Why me? Why don't you marry her? "

" She don't love me."

" We could make some wonderful publicity if you married her," mused Monty. " And afterwards we'd have a double act—the African Chief and his Jungle Bride."

" Stop day-dreaming. I'm finished."

" Not so fast." Joe Tooley had come in. He raised the flap and pointed across to the gates. " You're forgetting something. Big Tony and some of the boys are still on the lookout over there. You show yourself outside and ten minutes later Morpho'll be carving his name on your kisser."

The betrothal threat had made me forget Johnnie.

" But if I get this blacking off, at least her brothers won't recognise me. And then I'll have to lie low here till I can solve my trouble with Morpho."

Monty Timber turned nasty then.

" You want to stay here, you stay as the African Chief. You go white on me and you can get out. And anyway, you don't know how to get the stuff off. I told you it's my secret formula."

" You tell me how or I'll—"

I came over the railings at him. Luke put a hand in my face and I went sprawling back on the canvas.

" Now, now," he said. " Nobody wants to get rough."

I looked at his club-fists and the steel tips on his boots and agreed. " All right. Maybe I can't get the black off, but I won't appear under that palm tree any more."

" You will," said Monty. " If you don't get back into the act, I go across to Big Tony and tell him just who my African Chief is? How about that, eh? "

They had me. For the time being, anyway. I put on my Lily Langtry, adjusted my leopardskin, and went back onstage.

" That's a sensible Zulu," said Monty. " That jungle bride of yours may drop the whole thing. Or, if they do make trouble,

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Luke'll take care of you." He borrowed two more bruisers from Tooley to help Luke in case I started anything, and I sat glumly on my tomtom to consider my affairs.

My life had me over a barrel, up a creek and paddleless, and for good measure, a waterfall ahead, and the enemy firing from both banks. I was being held captive by a man with an eight-foot petrified giant, forced to work as an African Chief; liable, if I stayed, to be wed to a big dark lady with a grin like a split melon, or sacrificed to preserve the honour of the Bolongo tribe; and certain, if I left, to be beaten up by Luke and his mates, carved up by Johnnie Morpho, and doomed to remain vandyke-brown for the rest of my days.

They locked me in that night and I eventually fell asleep without having found any solution. I was terrified, but not really surprised, when I was awakened at dawn by a big negro with a knife in his hand.

"You hush up, or else—" he whispered.

I assumed he was Uncle.

"All right. I give in, Uncle. I'll marry her."

"What you say?"

"She wouldn't like it if you cut me up, would she? So put that knife away and I'll do anything."

"Don't know nothing 'bout no uncle, no marrying. I wanna talk to you 'bout your job."

"My job?"

"Used to be my job before police nick me. Mr. Timber say Ringo best damned African Chief he ever had."

"You're Ringo? I thought you were going up for six months?"

"Very fine man the judge and he say police ain't got 'nough evidence and they let me go. I want job back."

"But why come at this time of night?"

"This time, you by yourself. Ain't nobody help you."

The sun was beginning to shine for me; here maybe was good-bye to half my troubles.

"How'd you get in, Ringo. Wasn't the door locked?"

"Door's open now. Don't keep Ringo out just by locking door."

"I'll make a bargain with you. You tell me how to get Mr. Timber's blacking off me and you can have the job and this bed right now."

"African Chief before Ringo was white-face. I see him washing in petrol."

"Then get me some. But don't wake anybody."

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The petrol shifted most of my chocolate tan, but it couldn't get at the deeper streaks.

In the final result, although I could no longer be taken for an African, my face looked as if it had been done over with fancy mahogany graining.

I shook hands with Ringo and he climbed happily into the bunk. I felt like a Judas-sheep. But then, maybe he wanted to get married anyway; and if he didn't, he looked handy enough with that knife to look after himself.

I slipped carefully out of the booth, over the fence, and on to the canal bank.

It was after seven o'clock when I finally got back to my neck of the Old Kent Road. I went fast round the corner to my digs and ran into the stomachs of two large men: Big Tony and Banger Frick.

"Well," said Tony, "the early bird certainly catches the worm. Just lucky we're off early this morning. Johnnie's got a nag running at Newton Abbot. He will be pleased to see you before we go."

Morpho was eating his breakfast when they lugged me in. "Lord love us," he said, "your mug! Looks like somebody done you up as a pub-door. I been looking for you for a long time, you know."

"I'm sorry, Johnnie, about Evie. It wasn't my fault. Honest. She was tight and I was just trying to get her home. You ask Griffo the barman—"

"Forget it. I ain't been looking for you to chiv you. At first I was and you did well to scarper. But not now I ain't. I just want to thank you for what you done for me. You opened my eyes to the fancy little Evie and her tricks, you did. D'you see that lolly fall out of her bag?"

"Yes."

"That was mine. Two hundred and fifty quid she nicked from my desk. All my petty cash. I been losing money but I never suspected her. And I never would if you hadn't tangled with her that night. So, like I say, I ain't cutting you up, I'm just thanking you kindly."

Since I was back in luck, I thought I might as well play it all the way.

"Couldn't you give me the real goldplated thank-you, Johnnie, and write off that forty-seven quid against the two-fifty I saved you?"

"Don't press too hard, son. What about my reputation? If I let one twister off, how am I going to collect from the others?"

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"I'll lay a bet with you instead, then. I'll back that nag of yours to win forty-seven quid at Newton Abbot."

I reckoned that any horse that got Johnnie and the boys up at seven and down to Devon was as good as past the post already. The rest of the runners would be lucky if they woke up still four-legged.

He speared a piece of black pudding and gazed into it like a crystal. "That's smart. That way I can be soft without it getting around. So, just for your cheek, you're on. But we're square now, remember, and if you twist me again I'll be on you like a ferret. Now get out and give your face a go of furniture polish."

I went off down to Mrs. Murphy's for breakfast, free of debt, free of a mixed marriage, and free for the next portion of complexity my life had in store.

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FOR BATH CHAPS

A Bath chap we define as the vigorous type who likes a bit of mental P.T. as stimulus in the shower. If this is you, (whether hot, cold, or Turkish) get your wife or slave to call these out to you and then check your responses on page 101

1. *Can you identify: a. Old Bailey; b. Old Glory; c. Old Trafford; d. Old Mortality?*
2. *Who killed: a. Cock Robin; b. Abraham Lincoln; c. Henri Quatre; d. Agamemnon; e. Julius Caesar; f. Sherlock Holmes?*
3. *What was in: a. Pandora's box;*
   b. Joanna Southcott's box?
4. *Do you know what the retiring age was for a Vestal Virgin in ancient Rome? Could they marry?*
5. *Can you give the meanings of these useful words (all in the Concise O.E.D.): a. Sorn;*
   b. Gobemouche;
   c. Paraph.
6. *Is a Portuguese Man o' War a Grand National Winner, piece of mining equipment, jellyfish, or ship belonging to our oldest ally?*
7. *Whose were these animals, and what were they: a. Bucephalus; b. Hodge; c. Dashy?*

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BOTTLE OF PORT

Anxiety drummed in the very tips of his neat fingers

BY BARBARA McILROY

TWO intent backs stood bent over the exhibit. Heavy breathing denoted intense concentration.

One back was tweed-jacketed, hacking style, the square flap stretched tightly over flannel trousers.

Solid brown heels, polished like horsechestnuts, rested squarely on the floor. The trousers were worn and the jacket was worn, but both were neatly patched and mended.

Their owner had no gloves. One of his shiny-backed old man's hands, the veins standing out like a tangle of grey wool, held the other behind his back. The frayed edge of a clean cuff showed below the jacket sleeve.

The other back was grey-suited and dapper. Its owner held a silver-topped cane in both hands across its lower parts. A pair of black heels, neater and no less polished than the brown, rose and fell occasionally below crisply-turned-up narrow trousers. The fingers of butter-yellow gloves, negligently holding the cane, quivered as the heels descended.

The exhibition was organised by the Society of Model Railway Engineers; and the exhibit was a model, in the smallest gauge, of the Golden Arrow, built by a clergyman from Sunningdale.

After a quarter of an hour the dapper back straightened. The tweed jacket, aware for the first time of another's presence, squared his shoulders. Reluctantly they acknowledged each other.

"Interested in model railways?" asked the owner of the butter-yellow gloves, revealing a face rosy with exertion and adorned with a neat Edwardian moustache.

"Trains. Hobby, y'know. Prefer steam."

"Infinitely. But no space at home. Small bungalow. Can't run steam decently on less than gauge one."

"Mean you've got a model track?"

"Small one. Zero gauge. Runs in the spare room."

The other sighed. Without further comment he bent his back again.

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The dapper old man settled a hand-knitted stock below a stiff collar. He frisked his trouser leg with his cane, and balanced it on a polished toe. His moustache twitched upwards in a smile. "You got one?" he asked.

The other straightened up again. "No room," he said, "landlady. Perfect curse."

"Nuisance. Like to show you my track some time."

"Ah, mm. My name's Blount. Colonel. Decent of you."

"Guillamore. Delighted."

They shook hands. They bent their backs. They were silent. At five the exhibition closed.

"Cup of tea?" asked Guillamore.

"No, thanks. Don't usually."

"Could arrange a meeting, perhaps," tempted Mr. Guillamore. Surreptitiously Colonel Blount felt in his pocket.

"Might as well," went on Mr. Guillamore, "my party, y'know. Place just over the road. Often go there."

Colonel Blount's fingers encountered half his ticket for the exhibition, sixpence, and his pocket handkerchief.

"Good of you," he said carelessly.

In the teashop they sat punctiliously facing each other over a plastic-topped table, the dirty plates and crumby cake-papers of the last eaters puddled with tea. Guillamore leaned his cane carefully against a chair and hung his grey homburg on it. The ridges in the petersham primly binding the edge of the brim regimented themselves against the steamy atmosphere.

"Tea?" asked the waitress, looking away from them into the middle distance.

"And cakes," said Guillamore firmly. Colonel Blount nervously stroked his trouser pocket.

"Don't usually," he mumbled, as Guillamore handed a plate of cakes, the synthetic cream moulded on them like plaster cornices.

"Oh come, must eat."

"Well, thanks," the jacket sleeve hitched back, neatly bound with leather. Fingers with clean ribbed nails closed round the ribbed cake-paper, not so clean.

"Live in Reading?" asked Mr. Guillamore.

"Near the station. Good view of the track. Swindon and the West."

"That's the line I live near, by jove. Maidenhead. Just a four-roomed bungalow, but it's my own, y'know, and a bit of garden. Been thinking of laying the track outdoors, but that means no work on it in winter."

Colonel Blount nodded. Four rooms, he yearned, and a bit of garden.

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"I live in a boarding-house," he said. "Just a room. Much better to have a place of your own." He stirred his tea, surprised at the feel of the spoon in the cup, which was plastic. Their waitress yawned into a steamy mirror, patting her mouth with her hand.

"Not married?" asked Guillamore delicately.

Colonel Blount flushed. "My wife—chronic invalid. Lives in a nursing-home. Like to keep her comfortable."

His hand strayed again to his pocket. He looked fixedly at a cake with rose-madder icing and a piece of cherry on it.

"Always been interested in trains," he said after a few minutes. "May sound a bit silly to you, having a track and all that, but I've made a map of the complete track at Reading. I can see most of the trains from my window through binoculars. Mark 'em on the map with flags—rolling-stock and so on."

"Mean to say you've done the map to scale, and so on?"

"Certainly. Twenty-four inches to the mile."

"Jove, that's interesting. Most interesting."

Guillamore hung one arm over the back of his chair and crossed his legs, pointing and unpointing his toe. Colonel Blount sat with his legs apart, but very erect. They sat for some minutes without speaking.

The waitress came with an evil-smelling, damp cloth; she snapped it once or twice over their table and removed their empty cups and plates. Guillamore waited until she had gone and then pulled out his watch.

"Train goes in ten minutes. Must be off. Now when can you come over for an afternoon?"

"Well," said Colonel Blount. Endless empty afternoons yawned before his mind. Only Saturdays, when he saw Nettie—

"Saturday I go to the nursing-home," he said. "Most other days—"

"Suppose we say Friday, then? Good. Now mind you bring that map of yours. We can have a shot at reconstructing it, eh? I'm a dull dog, mind, but if you're interested in trains—"

"Most good of you. Delighted."

"Now don't trouble about this. Glad to have company. A florin should cover it, I think. Thank ye." Two shillings in neat, small fingers passed to the waitress' cupped palm. Hats lifted, a cane twirled, backs turned, hats replaced, and Guillamore was off to catch his train.

And that was five months ago.

Five months, for Colonel Blount, of excitement and desperate saving for his ticket to Maidenhead; for Mr. Guillamore of excitement and little extra spendings, on tiny nuts and bolts,

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strips of rail, and hardwood sleepers. With Colonel Blount's map spread on the floor they forgot their stiffening joints, and knelt happily, fingers tracing tracks for the preliminary survey. They crept about the floor like bears, bent double, squinting at a spirit level. They made minute calculations for the super-elevation of curves, brows furrowed, pencils laborious. They talked of trains. And trains. And trains . . .

Then, one evening, when he got back to his room at the top of the boarding-house, Colonel Blount sat down before the gas fire.

" I'll go just once more," he said to himself, " and then stop. Can't afford the fare, anyway. Can't even ask the chap to tea, as things are at present. Can't do a single thing for him." The fire started to pop and splutter, and Colonel Blount, knowing the meter and its ways, slowly undressed and climbed into bed. He sorted out his mending and, with Nettie's fitted workcase beside him, thrust his hand into a sock.

His mother had given her that workcase, he remembered, but she never used it, and the pairs of stork scissors, the thimbles, the stilettos had remained in their velvet-lined hollows until he had taken them out for his own use. Nettie had never been domesticated. Too pretty. He'd liked that. And how they used to entertain!

Well, he couldn't do it now. Couldn't do anything for Guillamore. His map, perhaps, had been of some use, but Guillamore had supplied the bits and pieces. No, he must stop going. Some little gift—and good-bye.

" So I thought perhaps, as things are at present, you might let me have a bottle on account. Wouldn't ask you this, only it's rather important to me."

The manager of his Club took a bottle swathed in straw reverently from his desk.

" Good heavens, Colonel Blount, that's all right, sir. I spoke to the secretary about it and he made no objection. No objection at all."

" Ah, mm. Decent of him. Decent of you. The '04 port, eh? Sure it hasn't been shaken up? " He looked anxious.

" Decant it and see," laughed the manager.

" Mm, ah well." He turned to go. 'Pon his soul, in some ways the old Club was going downhill. That young chap they'd made secretary had been a subaltern in his old regiment only the other day.

Colonel Blount held the bottle of port like a baby in the crook of his arm and started back to Paddington. This trip to Town had

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made a fearful hole in his savings. Really, when he came to think, he didn't quite know how he would pay for his room next week; his binoculars, of course, were first-class—but without the binoculars there would be no more train-watching for a long time. Still, he had the port, and his ticket to Maidenhead.

The name of Mr. Guillamore's bungalow was Caldicotts. It was written on the gate in white gothic letters. Colonel Blount rested his hand on the gate for a minute and looked at the front garden. Serried ranks of tulips were beginning to spear their way through straight beds railed in by a sharp edge of lawn. In the exact middle of the lawn was a bird bath. It was empty. Five sparrows splashed in a puddle on the tessellated path.

Nice little place, thought Colonel Blount. A mist obscured his eyes. He grasped the bottle of port tightly, and knocked three times on the front door with the brass gargoyle, rather more loudly than usual.

Mr. Guillamore, after a decent interval, whisked it open. "Ah, dear fellow, I fancy I've solved the difficulty of that curve we spoke of last time. What's that you've got there?"

"Bottle of '04 port. I—"

"'04 port? My dear fellow, where did you get it?"

"At the Club. I wondered—"

"Confound it, man, don't toss it about like that. Here, put it on the chest. Got it for your wife?"

"No, I thought perhaps—"

"Well, put it down and take off your coat. Now look here, I've completed the loop we were thinking of. Edward VII takes it easily. Come and see."

Colonel Blount hung up his worn greatcoat. The bottle sat on the hall chest, a tall beehive in its straw. He tried again as Mr. Guillamore bustled into the spare room.

"Look here, old chap—"

"You see, takes the curve perfectly. See how she leans to it? Pretty fair, eh?"

The engine completed the loop and started out again. Colonel Blount allowed himself a moment's silent admiration. Then he said, "As a small token, I wondered—Mm, ah. Fact is, old man, I brought the port for you. As a present. Because in future I feel I can't—as things are now I'm obliged—so there it is, old chap. Can't tell you how much I've enjoyed it all."

He held out his hand. The little scarlet thread veins in his cheeks sprang suddenly together into a flush that spread to his forehead.

Mr. Guillamore rose from his knees beside the track and took the hand. "For me?" he boomed. "'04 port? We must have

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a glass at once. Really is most kind of you. I haven't had anything in that line for years. Years, it must be.

"M'dear chap, come along, we'll find a decanter."

Colonel Blount followed him in unhappy silence as he went into the living-room and found a decanter at the back of a cupboard.

"Dusty," said Mr. Guillamore. "Better give it a wipe."

He went into the tiny kitchen and returned with a drying-up cloth. Lovingly he wiped the decanter and lifted the straw from the bottle. They gazed at it. It, too, held a bloom of dust.

"Funnel," said Guillamore, waking from a dream. "Got one somewhere." He rummaged.

They drew the cork. They decanted the wine, pouring it slowly through the funnel, holding their breath. They left it to settle for an unbearable quarter of an hour, fidgeting unnecessarily with the loop line.

"Later," thought Colonel Blount, "I'll say good-bye later."

"Should stand longer, really," said Guillamore, as they sat at last each with a glass on either side the fire, "but there."

They held up the rich, red liquid to the light. They nodded their glasses at each other. They drank.

"Jove," they said together.

"You know," said Mr. Guillamore, after the glasses had been refilled once or twice, "I never knew you were in the Indian Army."

The room had suddenly become full of comfortable, leisurely conversation, nicely balanced with friendly silences. Neither had mentioned trains.

"Come to that," said Colonel Blount, twisting his glass to catch the firelight, "I never knew you had been in the City."

"Must have had a deuced interesting life, a chap like you."

"Interesting?" Colonel Blount thought for a moment. "Well, I suppose so. Nothing like yours, of course. No great business deals, stocks and shares, sellings-out and buyings-up and the rest of it. Romantic, that."

"But travel."

"Oh yes, travel. Nettie used to be such a bad sailor, the first week on board." He laughed reminiscently. Then he sighed. "Used to be such a gay little thing." He stared at Guillamore.

"Knits for me sometimes now—when she feels able. Touching, of course, but—"

"Haven't got a picture of her, I suppose?"

"Matter of fact, I have. Not recent. Taken soon after we were married."

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He pulled out a leather wallet from his breast pocket. Inside it were two sepia photographs, stained and blotched with Indian heat. One was of the Colonel, aged thirty, head and shoulders, showing full regimentals. The other was of Nettie.

"Ah *yes*," said Mr. Guillamore as he looked at her. "Entrancing little woman. And that little fur boa. Entrancing. D'you know, she reminds me so much of Gertie Millar. You remember her?"

"Remember her? Good heavens, she was all the rage. I met Nettie soon after I first saw Gertie Millar. What was that thing she used to sing—*I'm such a silly*—how did it go?"

Mr. Guillamore leaned forward. His eyes sparkled. Beating time with his glass, he sang softly.

"*I'm such a silly when the moon comes out,*
I hardly seem to know what I'm a-bout.
Skipping, hopping, never never stopping,
I can't stand still although I try.

"And then that last line.

"*When the moon comes creeping up the sky.*

"Remember it?"

A smile consumed Colonel Blount's face. "Ah," he said. "Ah *yes*."

"That must have been in '09," said Guillamore. "I remember it so well. *Our Miss Gibbs*, at the Gaiety. Gertie sang it in one of those pierrot costumes, dark blue with white pompoms, and an enchanting white bow under her chin."

"Just before I left for the Punjab. They were good shows in those days. I didn't see half enough of them. Remember Phyllis Dare? And the old White City? And Daly's?"

"And the old Oxford in Tottenham Court Road? They've made it into some teashop place, I believe."

"Shouldn't wonder. And Eugene Stratton and Dan Leno?"

"Dan Leno. Never forget one joke he made. About a riverside house, where the river was at the bottom of the garden, and the garden was at the bottom of the river. Point was, m'father had a house by the river, here in Maidenhead."

They laughed, waving their glasses and wiping tears away with their free hands.

"Bit of a bachelor gay, I dare say?" asked Colonel Blount.

"Oh, I don't know. They were good days, but I never married, as you did. Greatest mistake of my life, that. Always regretted it. Charming little girl, but not quite, don't you know. Don't suppose it would have mattered, but m'father was dead against it.

"Now look where it's got me. Business didn't do so well. Just able to buy an annuity, and now I'm all alone, with a painted

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hussy coming in to cook me damp potatoes. Hate the sight of her. 'Course, I know you're really interested in trains, but if it hadn't been for your visits these last few months—"

"If it hadn't been for *you*, old chap. I'm pretty much on my uppers these days. These visits to you, they have been—well—"

"Mean to say you've enjoyed coming—apart from the trains, I mean?"

"Always been keen on trains but—well, there are other things, eh?"

Mr. Guillamore gazed at the firelight flickering on the polished toe of his shoe.

"Look here," he said, "I've been wanting to ask you for a long time, but I'm such a dull dog; didn't know if you'd care to. We can fit a bed in the spare room as well as the track. Would you come? Would you live here with me?"

He sat on the edge of his chair now, not looking at Colonel Blount, he was swaying a little with the fumes of port, and "the moon creeping up the sky," but with anxiety in the very tips of his neat fingers drumming against his glass.

"Live—here—with—you," said Colonel Blount, savouring the sentence as he had savoured that first sip of port. "*Live* here. Y'know, Guillamore, there's nothing I'd like better."

His chair seemed to be floating. His eyes shone. The loneliness and bleakness of his room, for which the trains seen through binoculars had never made up, seemed to him a bad dream.

Then he remembered why he had come with the port in the first place.

"I have nothing," he said. His voice broke and became gruff. "Nothing to give. Only bills. Pension goes nowhere. Couldn't possibly contribute—"

"Nothing?" said Guillamore, jigging in his seat. "You remember Gertie Millar and Dan Leno, you've led a life of travel and adventure, you've married an enchanting wife, and you say you have nothing to contribute! My dear fellow, trains apart, we could sit here yarning for the rest of our lives."

"Nothing to give," insisted the Colonel. The room swam before him. Guillamore's eager face slid to one side. He was broken, done, finished. Old.

"We'll get a bed," Guillamore was saying, "and it can go in the corner by the east siding. Won't matter, trains can run under it. We'll get the hussy to cook us something eatable, and—"

"*Curry*," said Colonel Blount, in a voice apparently back on the parade ground.

"Well, I don't know if she'd rise to that, but—"

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"No, no, I mean I can make curry. Learnt it from a real walla in Lahore. If you like it, I could make it as often as we want."

They looked at each other.

They smiled.

Carefully Guillamore refilled their glasses. Quivering a little in slightly unsteady hands, the port tilted to anticipating lips. From the spare room came a gentle rushing sound. Edward VII was still running round the loop line. But neither of them heard.

Softly, slowly, they were singing. How did it go?

I'm such a silly when the moon comes out,
I hardly seem to know what I'm a-bout!

© Barbara McIlroy 1959

★ ★ ★

SINKING SPIRITS

I had 12 bottles of whisky in my cellar, and my wife told me to empty the contents of each and every bottle down the sink, or else . . .! So I said I would, and proceeded with the unpleasant task.

I withdrew the cork from the first bottle, and poured the contents down the sink with the exception of one glass, which I drank. I extracted the cork from the second bottle and I did likewise, with the exception of one glass, which I drank. I withdrew the cork from the third bottle and emptied the whisky down the sink, with the exception of one glass, which I drank.

I pulled the cork from the fourth sink and poured the bottle down the glass, which I drank. I pulled the bottle from the cork of the next and drank one sink out of it, and threw the rest down the glass.

I pulled the sink out of the next glass, and poured the cork down the bottle, and drank the glass. I pulled the cork from my throat and poured the sink down the bottle. Then I corked the sink with the glass, bottled the drink, and drank the pour.

When I had emptied everything, I steadied the house with one hand and counted the bottles, corks, glasses, and sinks with the other, which were 29.

To make sure I counted them again, and when they came by I had 74, and as the house came by I counted them again and finally had all the houses and bottles and corks and glasses and sinks counted, except one house and one bottle, which I drank.

Quoted as the favourite funny story of
Sir Arthur Bryant

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Hi! James—let loose the Gorgonzola!

Punch, 1889

The Swiss they are a hardy race, melodious in their shoutings,
They climb up to the mountain tops and slide down on their outings;
And then they fortify themselves against the winter's cold
By masticating cheese that is a dozen decades old.
A dozen decades old (yodel)
A dozen decades old,
Long cheese, strong cheese, a dozen decades old.

The Swiss they are a gallant race, they have no taint of fear,
They hunt the wary edelweiss, the chamois and the beer;
But most of all they rise and shine when on the balmy breeze
They scent the rich aroma of a centenarian cheese.
A centenarian cheese (yodel)
A centenarian cheese,
There's nothing makes them gayer than a centenarian cheese.

STODDARD KING, *Song of Switzerland*

Processed Cheese

Sir,—I own a 1927 Wensleydale, and consider the performance superior to that of most modern mass-produced cheeses. Do your readers agree?—*Fromage*

Sir,—I agree with your correspondent "Fromage." I own a 1926 Brie, which still (if I may stoop so low) marches very much "con brie-o."—*Belcher*

Sir,—I am a believer in the cheese of to-day. I own one of last year's Chedlets, and find it superior to my old Cheddar in both general performance and economy of upkeep. It only requires

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devermification about every three months. Last week it made the journey from larder [N.B.] to pantry in 1½ hours, an average of 37 f.p.h. The return journey, despite the heavy dinner-hour traffic, was made in 2 hours 10 minutes. Also I find it runs well on pure stout, without the admixture of port demanded by the old model.—*Ave Hodie*

Sir,—I am very disappointed with the behaviour of my foreign model—it is a 1930 Camembert—on three counts: (1) My guests suffer severely from fumes; (2) the armature of the maggot has worn out, involving me in a costly replacement; and (3) the exterior fabric of the bodywork is deteriorating in several places. A friend with a 1929 Gruyère reports that it requires reboring every six months.—*St. Ivel*

Cheese Blues

I have a cheese upon the shelf,
And I cannot eat it all myself;
I've three good marks that lie in a rag,
In a nook of the chimney, instead of a bag.
Then, say, my Joan, will not that do?
I cannot come every day to woo.

ANON

High and Mighty

In 1840 a monster cheese was made from the milk of 750 cows by the people of Somerset, and offered to Queen Victoria as a bridal offering. After the Queen had accepted it, the farmers asked if it might be exhibited. The request was granted, but after it had been carted about a good deal the Queen refused to have it back.

Daily Mail Quiz Book

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Mitey Atom

The cheese-mites asked how the cheese got there,
And warmly debated the matter;
The orthodox said it came from the air,
And the heretics said from the platter.

ANON

Dé-Fondue

The Chronicle of Mites is a mock-heroic poem about the inhabitants of a decaying cheese who speculate about the origin of their species . . . This cheese-epic is a rather unsavoury production and the style is at times so monstrous and so realistic that the author should be called the Gorgon-Zola of literature.

OSCAR WILDE, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1888

Cheese Toast

The righteous minds of innkeepers
Induce them now and then
To crack a bottle with a friend
Or treat unmoneyed men,

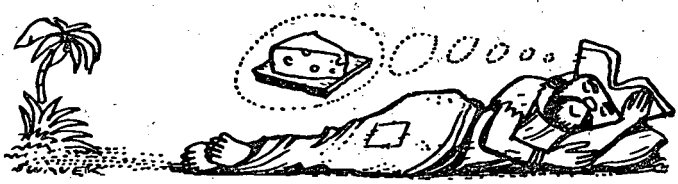
But who hath seen the Grocer
Treat housemaids to his teas
Or crack a bottle of fish-sauce
Or stand a man a cheese?

G. K. CHESTERTON, *The Song Against Grocers*

Desert Island Rarebit

" Marooned three years agone," he continued, " and lived on goats since then, and berries, and oysters. But, mate, my heart is sore for Christian diet. You mightn't happen to have a piece of cheese about you, now? No? Well, many's the long night I've dreamed of cheese—toasted, mostly—and woke up again, and here I were."

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, *Treasure Island*



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VILLA ALMIRANTE

Few men understood women as he did

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

LUCIFERO, Lieutenant of Carabinieri in charge of police work in the district of Lerici, paused for a moment at the head of the flight of steps which spiralled down to the Villa Almirante.

Where he stood, his heels were at chimney-top level. All the villas along the coast road were like that, set each on its own ledge in the steep, dusty hillside; the garden, a narrow sleeve of olive and orange tree and arbutus, resting one end on the road and the other three hundred feet below where the wine-dark sea complained and hissed over the rocks.

Dusk had fallen. The only sign of life was a chink of light from the kitchen quarters, a separate building to the left of the villa, where the Italian cook-housekeeper, Signora— Signora— Lucifero frowned. It was his boast that he knew all his own people by name.

Signora Telli. Of course. The Signora Telli was a war widow who ran the house for its English owner, helped by her son, the burly Umberto, and a local girl called—well, really, there were so many girls, one could not remember all of them—probably called Maria.

A loud gust of laughter sounded from the terrace on the seaward side of the villa. The house-party was in good form. Interesting people, thought Lucifero, one of whose tasks—one of whose pleasures—it was to get to know the English visitors who came, year by year in spring and autumn, to escape their own fog and mist and drizzle and bask in the warm sunshine of the Ligurian coast.

Lucifero knew those fogs and mists only too well. He had spent an eternity of two years in London in the wine shipper's office of his uncle; two years of cold and wet and flat beer and rock-like food fried into hard indigestible lumps; two miserable years, as far as anyone could be miserable who was twenty and healthy—and handsome.

The lieutenant passed a leather-gloved finger lightly across the top of his mouth, and smiled to himself in the gathering darkness.

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Perhaps it had not been so bad, after all. There had been consolations.

There had been Anna. There had been Geraldine, a graduate of Oxford University, but not too proud to be seen about with a young wine shipper's clerk. And his exile had paid one quite unforeseen dividend.

When Italy entered the war—most ill-advisedly Lucifero had thought even at the time—against the Allies, his quick and fluent grasp of English had stood as a barrier between him and the more unpleasant forms of national service. Rapid qualification as an interpreter had been followed by posts in the officer prisoner-of-war camps at Chieti, at Sulmona, and finally at Garvi, where he had proved so sympathetic to his charges that he had narrowly escaped being carried with them into Germany at the time of the Armistice.

To have joined the exclusive Carabinieri, and to have reached the rank of lieutenant in the short time since the war, was itself no mean achievement. But modesty was not among Lucifero's failings. He knew that it had been well earned. There had been no element of favour in his promotion. Hard work, attention to detail, and a facility for psychology had made him a successful policeman. The psychology, in particular, of women.

Few men, thought Lucifero, understood women as he did.

There was a second burst of laughter from the terrace on the seaward side of the villa. At that hour of the evening the party would be sitting out over their drinks as they waited for dinner to be served. Four of them had arrived ten days before. There was Lord Keaough, their host, the owner of the villa in which he spent two months of every year, an austere and craggy nobleman, and precisely Lucifero's idea of what an English peer should be, even to his baffling name. With him had come Mr. Colin Sampson, the publisher; Mr. Ralph Marley, the poet; and Miss Natalie Merrow.

His hand actually on the brass knocker, Lucifero paused, as a connoisseur will pause in front of a fine but puzzling painting; a gourmet before an intriguing wine. He had observed Miss Natalie for three seasons now. He had been certain, at first, that she was Lord Keaough's mistress. But that idea had died. She was of the Left Bank, cosmopolitan, bohemian. Knowledgeable about love, yes. But as yet disinterested in it.

Lucifero visualised her as he had seen her three evenings before for a few seconds in the Albergo Maritime, her skin browned by the sun to a colour which would have looked vulgar in a blonde but was perfect under her dark, carefully and carelessly arranged mop of black hair Lucifero corrected himself. Not black.

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Peasant women had black hair. This was the colour of very old, dark chestnut. Altogether an interesting specimen to a psychologist; a little tightly wrapped up in herself at present. One day she would fall apart deliciously in some lucky man's hands.

It had been a curious scene at the albergo. The four of them at their table with their drinks. At one side Lord Keaough, immobile, cut from a single piece of well-tanned leather. At the other the girl, between the publisher—with his chubby face and horn-rimmed glasses, boyish and bookish—and the poet, dark-haired, bright-eyed, Byronic, and indubitably drunk.

Lucifero had thought for a moment that they were going to do what English people of their class never did in public: that they were going to quarrel. Words had floated from Ralph Marley, high-pitched, emphatic, tumbling over themselves in bitter, eager spite. And Colin Sampson, normally, Lucifero surmised, a man of peace, had said something so sharp that even Lord Keaough had opened his sleepy eyes.

Lucifero had been sitting six tables away, unable to distinguish a word that was spoken but acutely aware of what was happening. He had half expected to see a glass emptied in someone's face. In his native Calabria knives would have been out long since.

Then Ralph Marley had climbed to his feet, turned his back on the party, and walked away. The others had watched him in silence.

The poet, pushing his way between the tables, had passed within a few feet of Lucifero, and Lucifero had observed his face, an odd mixture of petulance and passion. Now, standing with one hand actually on the brass dolphin knocker of the villa, he tried to picture it. He tried to bring it back into his mind, past the very different picture of Ralph Marley that was presently occupying his thoughts.

It was Umberto who answered the knock. He was only eighteen, but as heavy and as chunky as marble from the quarries of Carrara.

"Tenente?"

"Good evening, Umberto. You are well? And your mother, I hope."

"Very well indeed." He seemed almost to be standing guard in the hallway. "Do you wish me to tell—the Lordship—that you are here?"

Lucifero smiled to himself at this evasion. He was aware, none more so, of the difficulties which attended the pronunciation of Lord Keaough's name in any language, but above all in the Italian tongue which tries so conscientiously to separate every vowel from its neighbour.

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"Be good enough," he said, "to inform Lord Kuff that I would appreciate a word with him, alone, on a matter of importance."

"They are on the terrace." Umberto considered. "The doors to the salon are open. There is no privacy there. Perhaps the dining-room?"

"The dining-room should do well. But warn your mother that her excellent meal may have to wait a little. What we have to discuss will not be done with in five minutes."

Lucifero was standing in front of the empty fireplace in the dining-room when the door opened and Lord Keaough came in.

"Good evening, Tenente. Lucifero, is it not? I seem to remember that you speak excellent English, so I shall not have to inflict my terrible Italian on you. Do sit down."

"Your Lordship speaks excellent Italian," said Lucifero, but he made no attempt to move back into his native tongue. Nor did he sit. "What I have to tell you will not take a great deal of time. I have to start with a question. How long is it since anyone here has seen Signor Ralph Marley?"

He wished that the lighting was better. The single economical central bulb hid more of Lord Keaough's face than it revealed.

"Ralph? Let me think. Today is Friday. It was some time on Wednesday afternoon when he walked out on us."

"Walked *out*? You imply—?"

"He stood not upon the order of his going. He said no good-byes. He took no luggage. He went."

"Yes," said Lucifero. Curious how much a single word could imply. To walk was one thing. To walk out was another. He must remember the difference. "Can you tell me any more?"

"All that I know, and that's precious little. But perhaps you will tell me something first. Has he got into trouble?"

"Why do you ask?"

"In most countries," said Lord Keaough, "police mean trouble."

Lucifero showed white teeth under a hairline of black moustache. "Signor Marley is in no trouble now," he said. "He is dead."

Lord Keaough leaned forward, bending from the waist in a gentle, courteous gesture of interrogation. "Dead?" he said.

Lucifero stared at him, opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again in resignation. "Yes. His body was taken from the sea by a fisherman this morning, a half-mile out from Portovenere."

Lord Keaough stood, looking out through the window, as if he could see the hidden lines of the bay and estimate the currents as they set between the towering headlands.

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" If," agreed Lucifero, reading his thoughts, " he had entered the sea just here, in twenty-four or thirty-six hours he would have been carried to Portovenere."

" Yes," said Lord Keaough. " I'm afraid that's it. Shall I tell the others, or would you prefer to tell them yourself? "

Lucifero had given thought to this. Two factors influenced him. The first, that the lights in the salon would probably be better; the second that the other two, younger members of the party would hardly have the same unnatural control over their feelings as was being exhibited by this impossible aristocrat.

" Let us go to the salon," he said. " Perhaps you will permit *me* to tell your guests the news."

" Of course, of course."

Lord Keaough led the way down the short passage and into a large bright, pleasant room.

Natalie Merrow was sitting, upright, on one end of the sofa, an unopened book beside her, and Colin Sampson was standing behind her, talking to her or at her. He stopped in mid sentence when the door opened.

" This is Lieutenant Lucifero, of the Police," said Lord Keaough. " He has some bad news for us."

" Ralph! " said Natalie.

" What's happened to him? " said Colin.

If it was acting—and the possibility had always to be borne in mind—it was very fine acting. Not an amateur or bungled effort. Precisely the right intonation, exactly the correct proportions of realisation, shock, and pity.

" I have to tell you," he said. " I have already told his Lordship, the body was recovered from the sea, near Portovenere, early this morning. By a fishing boat returning to harbour."

" Yes," said Colin. It was as if he was confirming something which had been hinted at before. A possibility had turned into a probability. That was all.

" You will, I hope, excuse the observation," said Lucifero. " But, in some way, this news seems not to surprise you greatly."

The other two looked at Lord Keaough, who said, " Ralph was a poet, and a great admirer of Lord Byron."

" I see," said Lucifero. " He had the same idea? To swim across the gulf? "

" Yes. We attempted to dissuade him, of course."

" Why? "

" Ralph was neither as good a poet as Byron," said Colin, " nor as good a swimmer." Then he blushed, as if conscious that he had been guilty of some impropriety.

Lucifero said, " The indications are that Mr. Marley started his

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ill-fated swim in the late afternoon of Wednesday. I say late afternoon because he would hardly contemplate such a feat in the dark. This coincides also with what his Lordship has told me. That you last saw Mr. Marley on Wednesday afternoon."

They looked at him warily.

"Yes?" said Lord Keaough.

"If that is so, why was his absence not reported before?"

"Because," said Lord Keaough, "we did not know that he had been drowned."

"But you realised that he was missing."

"If we brought in the police every time Ralph walked out," said Mr. Sampson, an edge once more perceptible in his voice, "we should keep you gentlemen pretty busy."

"Mr. Marley," explained Lord Keaough, "was a poet."

"Temperamental?"

"You could call it that," said Mr. Sampson.

"Really, Colin," said Natalie. "Ralph is hardly twenty-four hours dead. I think we might refrain from speaking ill of him. Just until he is buried, perhaps?"

Lucifero looked at them curiously. There was something that he did not understand. Something to be docketed for future reference.

"I'm afraid," said Lord Keaough, "that Mr. Marley had cried 'wolf' too often. Last year he walked out on us in Rome, after a little difference of opinion, and reappeared in Venice. In Venice early one morning, for no reason at all, he decided to go to Scotland—"

"He said, afterwards, that he preferred grouse to pigeons," observed Natalie.

"And on that occasion, too, he took no luggage. Not even a toothbrush. It was—a sort of—affectation."

"A poet must be free," recited Mr. Sampson. "Untrammelled by any bonds. Unrestrained by any conventions."

"And on this occasion, you assumed that he had walked out on you—" Lucifero managed this newly-acquired idiom quite smoothly—"on account of—what? Some recent difference of opinion?"

"We had a sort of quarrel on Tuesday evening," said Lord Keaough. "It started at dinner, and went on over our drinks at the Albergo Maritime. As no doubt you observed, since you were seated a few tables away."

"Yes," said Lucifero. "I did, I think, observe something." But Lord Keaough, he could have sworn, had sat with his back to him throughout the incident. "If you feel at liberty to tell me what it was about—?"

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" It's not a secret," said Mr. Sampson. " My firm, Blakelock & Sampson, that is, had decided that we could not publish his latest book of verse. We had lost money heavily on the other three. Besides, we are not really publishers of poetry—"

" Messrs. Blakelock and Sampson," said Natalie, " make all their real money out of detective stories."

Mr. Sampson flushed again. Really, thought Lucifero, for a man in his middle thirties he was extraordinarily susceptible. And was the girl teasing him because she liked him or because she hated him? Time would no doubt give him the answer.

" There was the usual talk," said Mr. Sampson. " That all publishers are philistines who batten on the genius of the artist and squeeze him to death for their own profit."

" His eminent prototype, Lord Byron, also made many uncomplimentary references to publishers," observed Lucifero. " Could any of you tell me more precisely when you last observed Mr. Marley on Wednesday? "

" We pretty well live our own lives here," said Lord Keaough. " Get up when we like. Do what we like. We usually meet in the evening for a drink, and have dinner together. On Wednesday, actually, we all four of us had luncheon together. Ralph seemed to have got over his sulks, though he didn't eat much. In the afternoon I retired to my room for my siesta."

" I painted," said Natalie.

" I went for a walk, towards Tolaro," said Mr. Sampson.

" We three met for our drink—at about six? " The others agreed. " At about six. There was no sign of Ralph then or later."

" You painted, where? " asked Lucifero.

" On the hillside, overlooking Carrara. An hour's walk there. Three-quarters of an hour back, downhill. I was here by six."

" And you awoke from your siesta—? "

" I call it a siesta," said Lord Keaough. " I don't really sleep. I lie on my bed, and read a little, and then do some writing. I came down at half past five."

" And you heard and saw nothing? "

" I heard Signora Telli calling out once to Maria in the garden. Maria was, I think, putting out the laundry. Or more likely, at that hour, getting it in."

" I must question the servants afterwards," agreed Lucifero.

" Is it important? " said Lord Keaough.

Lucifero's head came round slowly. " Important? " he said.

" I mean, we are agreed what happened. The late afternoon was Ralph's time for bathing. He had often told us that he would try this particular swim. If it was an accident—"

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"But it was *not* an accident," said Lucifero. "Mr. Marley was taken from the sea fully dressed. And there is no seawater in his lungs. His head was crushed. He was dead before he entered the sea."

Three faces turned towards him. Three pairs of eyes centred on his. The hard lines which fenced Lord Keaough's nose and mouth seemed a little more marked, but he remained implacably impassive. There was a puzzled frown behind Natalie's eyes, and her lips were parted, showing her small white teeth. Mr. Sampson was blushing again.

The servants told him little about the dead man, but quite a lot about their patron and his guests; and, without realising it, a good deal about themselves, too.

"Signor Marley was a man of moods, Tenente," said Signora Telli. "A great poet, so we were told. But for me, I judge a man by the way he lives not by what he writes. And it is my opinion, and I say it with the proper reserve due when a man has been called unexpectedly to his Maker, that that young man did not live well. He had not a good name. We hear about such things more than you would imagine. Two years ago, there was an Austrian girl who threatened to kill herself—you heard?"

Lucifero had heard. But he was not greatly interested in what had happened two years before. "On the Wednesday afternoon," he said, "did you yourself see Mr. Marley?"

"Not in the afternoon at all. I was busy in my kitchen. Umberto was at the market. Maria might have seen him. She was in the garden part of the time, and may have seen him if he went to bathe."

Maria was summoned. She was seventeen, a dark girl with a pert, peasant face and a budding beauty. She was also, clearly, very nervous. Lucifero thought it better to question her in Signora Telli's presence.

She had been in the garden on three—or perhaps four—occasions. First to collect some of the firewood which Umberto had chopped and left. Then to pick radishes and lettuce for the evening meal. Twice to bring in washing. She had *not* seen Signor Marley. She was positive she had not seen him. If she had seen him, she would have said so. What reason would there be to lie? She had *not* seen him.

"Understood," said Lucifero dryly. "Are you affianced to Umberto?"

Both women seemed to be struck dumb by this question. Signora Telli said at last, "There is nothing finally arranged. It is an understanding. But Umberto is only just eighteen."

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" He is a good boy," said Lucifero. " And old for his age. I was affianced before I was eighteen."

" He is the best of sons," agreed the Signora. " And Maria will be a good wife to him—when the time is proper." She smiled suddenly at the girl, who smiled back. " You wish to question Umberto? "

" But if he was at the market," said Lucifero, " what could he tell me? "

Signora Telli dismissed Maria with a jerk of her head. When the door had closed behind her, she said, " I have something to tell *you*. It concerns his Lordship."

" Yes," said Lucifero.

" What I have to say has, you must understand, nothing to do with the drowning of Signor Marley."

" Of that I must be the judge."

" It is something which I have long felt should be said—to someone in authority. He is a kind patron, generous and easy to work for." She seemed suddenly unsure of herself. " But—"

" But? "

" I think he is a spy."

Lucifero prided himself that he was difficult to surprise, but for a moment he felt his mouth falling open. Then he recovered himself.

" It does not seem very likely," he observed mildly. " We are not at war."

" If he is not a spy, why does he sit for hours and hours on the terrace, with a great pair of glasses—" she demonstrated with her hands—" staring out at the ships? "

" Perhaps it is the birds he watches. Not the ships."

She looked at him doubtfully, to see if he was laughing at her. He pinched her arm and said, " Do not worry. If he is a spy, you have discharged your duty by telling me of your suspicions."

Nevertheless, before he left for the night he walked back to the house to have a further word with Lord Keaough.

" There is much to do," he said, " but it cannot be done until morning. We shall have to examine the private beach at the foot of your garden, and the rocks about it. And there is a fuller autopsy to be made."

" I've been thinking," said Lord Keaough. " What seems most probable is that Ralph went down for his swim, tried the short cut to the beach down through the rocks—it is dangerous, but he had done it before—and slipped, hitting his head as he went into the sea. There is only one difficulty. It that was so, he would have dropped his bathing costume, and we should have found it. Unless it fell and floated out to sea with him."

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Lucifero said, "When found, Signor Marley was wearing an open shirt and linen trousers. Under the trousers, he was wearing bathing shorts."

"I see," said Lord Keaough. "Then my theory may well be correct."

"Very likely. Meanwhile, I must ask you and your friends to be patient."

"We are none of us planning to leave," said Lord Keaough. "We are at your disposal. I have no doubt you will soon discover the truth."

"Speriamo," said Lucifero, and took his leave.

In police work things did not often happen quickly. It was time and hard work that solved most problems. Some facts, a very few facts, emerged. A painstaking, inch-by-inch search of the grassy plateau which crowned the knoll—a hidden place, open only towards the sea, and much used by the inhabitants of the villa for sunbathing—brought to light two hairpins, the lid of a tin of face-cream, a number of old matchsticks, and a 1930 five-lire piece. There were two routes down to the beach: the one cut from the smooth rock, serpentine but safe; the alternative descent over the sheer rocks, a mountaineer's route. Nothing of significance was discovered on either. Nor was this strange.

"If he went to the beach by the path," said Lucifero to Lord Keaough, "he would leave no mark. If he fell from here, he would strike one of those rocks. It has been washed too well by the sea to leave clues for us."

"Has the autopsy been helpful? Or perhaps you are not allowed to tell us?"

"Certainly I can tell you. It shows two things. That Mr. Marley entered the sea with little in his stomach—"

"Which agrees with late afternoon."

"Yes. And that his head was broken by impact on the rocks. A considerable impact, one would say. There are tiny fragments of rock splinter still embedded in the bone."

"All of which—" began Lord Keaough.

"All of which," agreed Lucifero, "points to your solution being the right one."

That had been on the Saturday. By Wednesday, routine and order and a surface calm had returned to the Villa Almirante. Lucifero had kept his distance. He spent long hours on the hillside above and to one side of the villa with an excellent pair of glasses. He could see the terrace where Lord Keaough sat, similarly equipped. He studied Lord Keaough. Lord Keaough studied—what? He could see most of the steeply-sloped garden,

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although the knoll and the beach were both hidden, one by trees, the other by the steep, overhanging bluff. They were days of intense heat. The sun emerged coyly from its veil of early morning mist, swung through a cloudless sky, and retired at last in sulky, crimson splendour behind the hills of the Cinque Terre. Lucifero, was content to wait. Given such people, in just such a situation, it was inevitable that something would happen. It *must* happen. If it did not he would make it happen.

Three times already he had sent for Maria, and each time his questions had been shrewder and Maria's protest more voluble. On the final occasion, the young Umberto had escorted her to the police station, and had waited in the outer room, glowering and unapproachable . . .

On the late afternoon of that Wednesday, Lucifero, from his vantage point, watched Colin and Natalie walk down the garden together. They disappeared into the trees. Curse the trees, thought Lucifero. They hid too much. No trees, no problems.

The minutes ticked by. The heat-waves danced and shimmered off the rocks. Something moved at the top of the garden slope, a flash of white. Lucifero steadied his binoculars in his sweating hands. It was Umberto, moving with quiet but purposeful deliberation, keeping behind the shelter of the olive trees, making for the knoll. A peeping Tom? Lucifero thought it possible, but unlikely. Umberto's interest in girls, and in Maria in particular, was much too simple and much too direct for him to have to stimulate his passion by spying on others.

Lucifero contained his soul in patience. A flash of colour among the trees. Natalie appeared, walking quickly for such a hot afternoon. It was too far away to read expressions, but Lucifero deduced from her walk that she was angry.

He shut up his glasses, jumped to his feet, and ran down the hill.

Outside the villa, Natalie passed him. Her face was flushed, but that might have been exercise. She said, "Good afternoon, Lieutenant," but made no attempt to stop or talk. She had recovered whatever poise she might have lost.

Lucifero saluted gravely, then ran quickly down the steps, and entered the Villa Almirante without knocking.

Lord Keaough was sitting on the balcony in a wicker chair, his glasses to his eyes. He said without looking up, "You've come in at the right moment, Tenente. Is that chance, or have you been watching, too?"

"I have been watching, too," said Lucifero.

It had, of course, occurred to him that if the truth was apparent to him, it might well be apparent also to as shrewd an observer as Lord Keaough.

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"I would suggest," Lucifero said, "that you walk down by the main path, taking your time; I will go by the side path. It is possible, by the exercise of agility, to work across from it to the path above the bathing beach. Try to keep in sight, and do not interfere until I give the signal. Whatever happens."

He paused and added again, "Whatever happens." Lord Keaough nodded, and walked down the steps into the garden.

Colin Sampson lay flat on his back, his eyes tightly shut. The strong sun beat down through the trees, and penetrated his screwed-up eyelids. If I was twenty years younger, he thought, I should be crying. This seemed such an odd thought that he sat up abruptly. He had just asked Natalie to marry him. And she had refused. Being totally inexperienced, he had misread this refusal as coyness and had tried to grab hold of her. And he had had his face smacked.

And now he was quite ready to argue himself back into a mood of self-respect. Natalie, he had come to the conclusion, had been more upset by Ralph's death than any of them had suspected. This was a two-edged thought. It meant that she had been fond of Ralph. No. Fond was the wrong word. It meant that she had been emotionally involved with him. But it meant also that if he approached her again, when she was more herself...

At this point, he found himself staring into the anger-crazed face of Umberto; a face which was, unnervingly, only a few inches above the ground. Umberto had been snaking forward towards Mr. Sampson on his elbows and knees. Now, having been discovered, he scrambled to his feet, and it could be seen that he was holding in the hand a wicked-looking malacca stick, an inch thick; a sort of Penang Lawyer which some guest had left behind him.

Mr. Sampson got up awkwardly, and was just in time to avoid the first blow which came hissing down and grazed his left arm.

"Stop," he said. "Stop it, I say. There is some mistake."

The next blow cut him about the shoulders with a cracking force which threatened his collar-bone. He flung an arm round Umberto in a frenzied grapple. But the thirty-five-year-old publisher was no match for the eighteen-year-old peasant boy. Umberto tore himself away with contemptuous ease and raised the stick again. Mr. Sampson abandoned any shreds of dignity and began to shout.

A shot exploded out of the bushes below the knoll. Lucifero, sweating with haste and exertion, had drawn his police gun from his holster and fired—into the air.

For an instant all movement ceased. Then Umberto twisted

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about, and ran for the path which led up to the house. He found Lord Keaough blocking it. He hesitated before that frail but indomitable figure, and was lost. Lucifero had reached level ground, and was walking towards him.

"That will be enough," he said. "More than enough." He had returned his gun to its holster. He knew that he would have no cause to use it. The situation was under control.

"Murdering swine," said Mr. Sampson.

"Enough," said Lucifero again. "We will go up to the house. All of us."

When they reached the small paved courtyard which lay between the villa and the servant's annexe, Lucifero called a halt. He said to Mr. Sampson, "Be kind enough to telephone the Carabinieri post and ask for Sergeant Malagodi."

And to Umberto, "I shall charge you, formally, with the murder of your English guest, Mr. Ralph Marley. For the moment, you may go into the kitchen. If you try to leave it without my permission, you do so at your own peril."

He said this in a high clear voice, in which Lord Keaough thought he detected an undercurrent of distinct satisfaction.

Half an hour later Lucifero, Lord Keaough, Mr. Sampson, and Natalie were seated in the salon, discussing the unexpected events of the morning. Sergeant Malagodi, a dour Sicilian, had arrived, and was in the kitchen, sitting over Umberto, who had so far said nothing at all.

"I've been trying to work things out," said Mr. Sampson. "Umberto is terrifically jealous. Almost unhinged. If he imagined that Ralph had been—paying attentions—to Maria, that would account for his attacking him, and toppling him into the sea."

"And his attack on you?"

"Well—I suppose—he might have had the same idea about me." He was aware that Natalie's eyes were on him.

"If I may be forgiven the observation," said Lucifero. "In Mr. Marley's case, there might be grounds for such suspicion. In yours, they would be—well—far fetched. So much so, that unless someone had sowed the seed in his mind . . ." He paused.

Lord Keaough gave a dry chuckle. "He means you're not a ladies' man, Colin," he said. "Not yet."

Natalie said sharply, "And I'm glad he's not. As the only lady present, I can assure you there is no more stomach-turning description—"

She was interrupted by a loud scream.

The three English jumped to their feet. Lucifero sat still, swinging one jackbooted leg over the other.

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A second scream. Loud, shrill protests. The clatter of feet, and Maria was there, a Maria with wild, hurt face and dishevelled clothes. A Maria beyond all fear and past all shame.

"Arrest me," she cried. "Arrest me, and let Umberto go. I am a wicked girl. Take me away. Put me in your prison cell."

Signora Telli appeared behind her, ducked nervously to the company, and put a hand on Maria's arm. Maria shook it off.

"I will confess all," she said.

"Excellent," said Lucifero. "No doubt a confession will make much plain."

His cool voice had its effect. Maria stopped trembling. She said rapidly but clearly, "Signor Marley professed himself much attracted to me. I was in the garden when he came down to bathe. We went together to the knoll. He—I—I cannot tell you, but we struggled. As I broke away from him he stepped back, and fell. It was a long time before I even dared to look. When I did so, he was most evidently dead. The sea was already carrying him away."

"Silly girl," said Lucifero. "It has, of course, been plain all along that that is what happened. It only needed that you should speak out and speak the truth. Why, instead, did you tell lies to Umberto about poor Signor Sampson here?"

"It was all those questions you asked me, Tenente. Umberto was suspicious. I had to tell him something. So I told him lies—about Signor Sampson, to lead him away from the truth. I was a bad girl."

"You are a liar," said Lucifero. "Like most girls of your age. But you are not a murderess. That is quite evident. The truth is always evident—when people bother to tell it. Mr. Marley's death was, as to the larger part, accident, as to a very small part, self-defence. You will have to give evidence at the Inquest tomorrow. That is all. And I hope by that time you will have recovered your self-possession. Take her away now, Signora, and tell Umberto I wish to see him."

As he left the villa, Lucifero was content. All had come out surprisingly well. Mr. Sampson had decided not to prefer any charge against Umberto. Indeed, for the publisher, the auguries were good. His plight had stirred a motherly interest in Natalie, and Lucifero judged that her first refusal of him might be by no means final.

Maria had, of course, behaved stupidly. But as well desire the world to stop in its course, as desire girls of seventeen to behave sensibly. Umberto, as soon as he got her alone, would beat her for lying to him, and would then marry her. Many

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a successful marriage has been founded on a good beating.

As for Mr. Marley—poor Ralph Marley. That twentieth-century Byron, dreaming of who knew what? What conquests, what triumphs, what Isles of Greece? Stumbling to his death, pushed by a serving-maid.

Lucifero had reached the top of the steps. As he opened the gate, he remembered some lines of Byron's which seemed a suitable epitaph for his successor:

With more capacity for love than earth
Bestows on most of mortal mould and birth,
His early dreams of good outstripp'd the truth,
And troubled manhood followed baffled youth.

Only one question remained unanswered. Was Lord Keaough a spy?

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" Let's go somewhere and stalk."

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★ *Versatile Robert Sheckley, master of science fiction, can also turn out a gruesome psychological chiller—remember Fear in the Night? His witty new story is not sf, but it's certainly psi.*

SVENGALI IN WESTCHESTER

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

I CONSIDER myself a reasonable man, not given to hasty decisions. I do not laugh at other people's beliefs, for I might be wrong, although it is unlikely. Still, the mathematical possibility is there, and I generally respect it. But a time came when I had to do something quickly and decisively about Helen.

On the evening in question, I came home from work at my usual hour, went directly into the kitchen and kissed Helen on the neck. Helen has a pretty neck, and as a rule enjoys being kissed on it. Tonight she seemed preoccupied.

"How did that lunch go today?" I asked. I pride myself on being the sort of husband who asks about charity lunches, church bazaars, flower shows, and school board meetings.

"I didn't go," Helen said.

"Why not?" I knew she had been planning that lunch for over a month.

"I just didn't feel like it," Helen said, becoming suddenly very busy with the beans on the stove. Helen is a college graduate, but they never taught her guile. When she attempts an untruth, she's as obvious as a kitten at a dog show.

"Out with it, woman," I said. "What happened?"

"Nothing *happened*," Helen said. "I stayed in all day. It just wasn't a good day."

"Why not?"

She hesitated. "Professor Marçon told me not to go out today," she said at last, speaking very rapidly. "He said this is an especially bad day for a Gemini. An accident-happening day. Mars is in the House of the Moon, and Saturn—" She stopped when she saw the pained and incredulous look on my face.

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" We will discuss this after dinner," I said, and stalked into the living-room.

Some two months ago, a gipsy tearoom opened in our part of Westchester. It was one of those places with chintz curtains, copper kettles, fake Tudor furniture, and a fortune teller named Professor Marçon.

Helen and some of her friends had their fortunes told. They were mightily impressed as women tend to be by fortune tellers. I viewed it as a harmless amusement similar to bridge or attending television shows, and nodded agreeably at the stories of Professor Marçon's uncanny insight.

But Helen was carrying the thing too far. She went dutifully at least once a week, and our bookshelves were piled with horoscopes, dream books, tarot cards, and the like. Now it had reached the point where Helen's actions were being influenced by this mountebank, dictated, in fact! A Svengali was making my wife his Trilby! It was just too much.

I ceased brooding and started glowering. I am certainly a reasonable man, but enough is enough. By profession I am an aircraft design engineer. I work with concrete physical facts. At Turner Aviation our ships do not fly because Venus is in the ascendancy, nor do all our computations fail us when Mars is in the House of the Moon, or some such nonsense.

Professor Marçon was bringing superstition back to Westchester. He had overstepped himself. I had to end it.

After dinner I proceeded to demolish with irrefutable logic the entire mystique of fortune telling. I am a scientific man and I went about it scientifically. I spoke of the laws of probabilities concerning tea-leaf patterns, and the astronomical absurdities inherent in astrology. I went at considerable length into the refractive index of crystal balls, and ended by explaining the mathematical concept of Chance concerning tarot cards.

I leaned back exhausted but satisfied and said, " Well? "

" I have missed my favourite television programme," Helen said icily. She detests being lectured.

" Do you understand what I have been saying? "

" Of course," Helen said. " I am no more superstitious than you. But Professor Marçon is different."

" He's undoubtedly shrewd," I said, " but the methods of fortune tellers are well known. They guess many things from your general appearance, your clothes, your voice, and vocabulary. They make vague statements until something fits. Then they—"

Helen shook her head stubbornly. " Professor Marçon's predictions are not based on appearance. Why don't you go yourself and find out? "

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At that moment The Idea dawned upon me. I paused to let it assume full shape and texture. Yes, I felt sure it would work.

Slowly I said, "He probably knows all about me through you, so it wouldn't be a fair test. I'll bring a friend, though."

"What friend?" Helen asked.

"Nobody you know. I can't take a chance on your accidentally giving information to Marçon."

"I thought I knew all your friends," Helen said suspiciously.

"You don't know this one. If Marçon is completely wrong about him—"

"He couldn't be *completely* wrong!"

"But if he is?"

"We'll see," Helen said.

I leaned back in my armchair and opened the evening paper. I permitted myself a small smile. Approached rationally, every problem has a solution. And I am rational, if nothing else.

We arranged the meeting for a Saturday afternoon in the tea-room. Helen and Professor Marçon were already at a table when I arrived with my friend. Helen looked strangely apprehensive. Professor Marçon was in his fifties, dressed completely in black, and he had a charlatan's little beard. He seemed amused.

I introduced Richard Dake.

Marçon studied my friend intently, but Dake wasn't an easy man to size up. He was very tall and gaunt, one of those ageless men. His tweed suit was of a good make and well pressed, but a shade threadbare. His tie was fastened fastidiously, with perhaps a hint of the dandy. Upon his finger was a signet ring, but the crest was indecipherable.

We drank tea, and Marçon's bright, beady eyes darted from Dake's unassuming, honest face to his thin brown hair, his bleak grey eyes, his strong but uncalloused hands. He listened intently to the slight burr in Dake's speech.

Finally, Marçon began. And I must admit, it was an impressive performance. Because he started with *me*.

"For you," he said, "a time of trial and travail is at hand. I wish you good fortune in it." Then he turned to Dake.

Dake, he said, was a university man from a West country family. Business had not been going well; he had been considering a change in occupation. Marçon watched intently, but he could have read more from a stone wall. Not a nerve in Dake's face twitched, not a muscle moved.

Drawing his own inferences from that, Marçon went on to say that Dake was a man of iron nerve and determination, a man superior to the forces of fate and the bludgeonings of nature.

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His sterling character would be rewarded, Marçon said, in a position of trust and service to mankind.

And Dake didn't flicker an eyelash.

When Marçon finished we thanked him and left. As soon as we were outside, Helen said, "Well?"

"The professor was wrong about a few little things," I said casually. "For example, Mr. Dake is not a graduate."

Dake grinned.

Helen looked a trifle startled.

"Nor does Mr. Dake come from the West country," I said. "Where were you born, Mr. Dake?"

"Manchester."

"And where have you lived most of your life?"

"In London."

"But your accent—" Helen began.

"A bit of a burr helps in my line of work," Dake told her.

"I came across Mr. Dake," I said to Helen, "in the East End—in Whitechapel, to be exact. He was sleeping in a doorway."

Helen blinked rapidly but said nothing.

"The fact is, I'm down and out," Dake said, grinning a broad and silly grin, all the reserve I had schooled him in now gone. "Down and out, and pleased with my station in life."

"Oh!" Helen said at last. "How disgusting! It isn't fair!"

"It's perfectly fair," I told her. "Professor Marçon reads men's fortunes, remember? *Not their outward appearances!*"

I extracted some notes from my wallet. "Thank you, Mr. Dake," I said. "You may keep the suit, of course, and the shoes. Tell me, what are you going to do with that money?"

"I am going," Dake said, "to get completely, happily, roaring drunk."

And he turned and sauntered merrily out into the street.

Helen and I went home in silence . . .

Of course, that did it. Helen has thrown out her dream books, burnt her tarot cards, given away her horoscopes. After a few days she even forgave me for the rather low trick I played on her.

We settled back into our rational existence. And I thought that was the end of it. But last week a man entered my office, a tall, gaunt, stony-faced man wearing a once-good suit. It was Dake. I shook hands with him warily, expecting a touch.

"I've come to do you a favour," Dake said.

"Oh?"

"Absolutely. You strike me as the kind of man who's up-to-date and forward-looking. You've got a new car and the latest appliances in your home. Right?"

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"Um," I said noncommittally.

"Of course. But a single glance round this office tells me you're getting along on old-fashioned filing methods, ancient typewriters, an inadequate communication system—"

It took me a moment to realise that Dake was selling office equipment and methods. "What happened?" I asked.

"Well, sir," Dake said, "after I left you, I started thinking about what the fortune teller man said. And you know, I decided he was right!" He blushed and looked away. "I mean, I *am* a man of iron will and determination, way down deep. I just didn't let it come out before. I thought about that for the better part of two days, and in the end I didn't buy any booze. I bought a square meal and started looking for a job."

"You amaze me," I said feebly. "How is the work going?"

"Can't complain," Dake said. "I feel I'm performing an important social service. It's strange how many old-fashioned offices there are in a modern city like this. Take yours . . ."

Dake showed the office manager and the cost accountant how they'd save money by spending it on proper equipment and methods. His arguments, put forth in his honest West country accents, were unanswerable. The firm he represented was old and reliable. He closed the sale with no difficulty.

I walked to the door with him. "It's preposterous," I said. "I just can't get over it. Professor Marçon was so wrong about everything else about you—"

Dake shook his head. "I did have two years at college before I quit."

"But the West—"

"I have always felt the West country is my spiritual home," Dake said serenely. "I expect to retire there some day."

And he left.

Naturally, I told Helen none of this. Women are too quick to jump to unwarranted conclusions. I am a scientific man. I returned to Professor Marçon to pursue the thing a little further.

Rationally, it is ridiculous.

But now I must end this account and get to work. We have reached a crisis here, and our plant is stopped dead on a design problem. It's in my lap.

And tonight is a particularly auspicious night, a *problem-solving* night, for a Capricorn such as I!

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★ ★ ★

WATT NEXT?

The only thing we can remember about the speed of light is that it gets here too soon in the morning.

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KEY TO MY HEART

A sly look came to her, a wide smile
—suddenly she laughed

BY V. S. PRITCHETT

WHEN Father dropped dead and Mother and I were left to run the business on our own, I was twenty-four years old. It was the principal bakery in our town, a good little business, and Father had built it up from nothing.

Father used to wink at us when Mother talked about their first wedding. "How many times have you been married? Who was it that time?" he used to say. She was speaking of the time they ventured out of the bakery into catering for weddings and local dances.

For a long time when I was a child we lived over the shop; then Mother made Father take a house farther down the street. Later still we opened a café next door but two to the shop, and our idea was to buy up the two little places in between.

But something went wrong in the last years of Father's life. Working at night in the heat, getting up at the wrong time of day, and then the weddings disorganised him. They were his downfall. There is always champagne left over at weddings and Father got to like it and live on it. And then brandy followed.

When Mr. Rollick, the solicitor, went into the will and the accounts, there was muddle everywhere and bills we had never heard of came in.

"Father kept it all in his head," Mother said, very proud of him for that. Mr. Rollick and I had to sort it all out, and one of the things we discovered was that what we owed was nothing to what people owed us.

Mother used to serve in the shop and do the books. She did it, we used to say, for the sake of the gossip and to daydream about why the schoolmistress ordered crumpets only on Thursdays; or guessing, if someone ordered more of this kind of cake or that, who was going to eat it with them. She was generally right and she knew more about what was going on in the town than anyone else in it.

As long as the daily and weekly customers paid their books she didn't bother; she hated sending bills and she was more pleased

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than upset when Mr. Rollick told her there was a good £600 owing by people who either hadn't been asked to pay or who were simply not troubling themselves. In a small business this was a lot of money.

When I did what Mr. Rollick wanted, and sent out accounts to these people, saying politely that the account had no doubt been overlooked, Mother looked mournful and said getting a commission in the Army had turned my head.

The money came in, of course. A few did not answer, though when I called at their houses they paid at once. But the look on Mother's face was as much as to say I was a son ruining her life work and destroying her chances of holding her head up in society.

At the end of two or three months there was only one large account outstanding, a Mrs. Brackett's; you can guess Mother made the most of this. Mrs. Brackett did not answer. Mother spoke highly of Mrs. Brackett, said she was such a lady, came of a wonderful family, and once even praised her clothes. She was the richest woman in the county and young. She became my mother's ideal.

Mrs. Brackett was married to a pilot and racing motorist known as Noisy Brackett in the town. It was she, as my mother said, nodding her head up and down, who had the money. Noisy was given a couple of cars and his pocket money but, having made that expense, Mrs. Brackett paid as little as she could as slowly as she could to everyone else.

When I talked about her account to other shopkeepers in the town they put on their glasses, had a look at their books, sniffed, and said nothing. Every shopkeeper, my father used to say, woke up in the early hours of the morning thinking of how much she owed them and dreamt of her fortune. You can work out how long her bill with us had run on when I say it was nearly £230. The exact sum was £228 17s. 4d. I shall always remember it.

The first time I made out Mrs. Brackett's bill I gave it to Noisy. He often came into the café to flirt with the girls, or to the shop to see Mother and get her to cash cheques for him. He was a thin little man, straight as a stick and looked as brittle, covered—they said—with scars and wounds from his crashes. He had the curly shining black hair of a sick gipsy and the lines of a charmer all over his face. His smiles quickly ended in a sudden stern twitching of his left cheek and eye, which delighted the women like the crack of a whip. He was a dandy, and from Mother he had the highest praise she could give to any man. He was, she said, snobby.

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When I gave Noisy our bill he handed it back to me at once. "Be a sweety-pie," he said, "and keep it under your hat until the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow's my pay day and I don't want the Fairy Queen to get her mind taken off it, d'you follow? Good! Fine! Splendid fellow! Bang on!"

And with a twitch he was back in his low white sports car. "Bring it yourself," he said, looking me up and down. I am a very tall man and little Noisy had a long way to look. "It'll do the trick."

Noisy did not hide his dependence on his wife. Everyone, except the local gentry, liked him.

So, on the Thursday, when the shop was closed and I could leave the café to the waitresses—a good pair of girls, and Rosie, the dark one, very pretty—I took the van and drove up to Heading Mount, four miles out of the town.

The land in that valley fetches its price—you wouldn't believe it if I told you what a farm fetches there; higher up the land is poor, where the oakwoods begin and all the stretch that belonged to old Mr. Lucas, Mrs. Brackett's father, who made a fortune out of machine tools. The estate was broken up when he died.

I came out of the oakwoods and turned into the drive which winds between low stone walls and tall rhododendron bushes, so that it is like a damp, dark, sunken lane and very narrow. I was speeding to the sharp turn at the end of the drive before you come to the house when I had to brake suddenly. Mrs. Brackett's silver limousine was drawn broadside across it, blocking the drive completely. I ought to have seen this was a bad omen.

To leave a car like that, anywhere, was typical of Mrs. Brackett. If there was a traffic jam in the town, or if someone couldn't get into the market, nine times out of ten Mrs. Brackett's car was the cause. She just stepped out of it wherever it was, as if she was dropping her coat off for someone else to pick up. The police did nothing.

She smiled at them, raised one eyebrow, wagged her hips, and let them see as much of her legs as she thought fit for the hour of the day as she got back in and drove off with a small wave of her hand that made them go red with apologies and blow up someone else. Sometimes she went green with a rage that was terrifying coming from so small a person.

I left my van in the drive and walked round her car towards the house. It was an old L-shaped house, sheltered by sycamores and built in the grey flaking stone of our part of the country. They say her father paid twelve thousand pounds for it, and that included two or three cottages and farm buildings. The kitchens

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and servants' rooms and garages were at one side of the L, modern buildings screened by laurels—not that there were often any servants there. There was a small circle of lawn with a statue in the middle of it in front of the house.

Crossing the lawn I realised I had missed the back drive to the house, and that I ought to have taken a wire-fenced road across the fields to the farm and the kitchen where the housekeeper lived, but I had not been up there for several years and had forgotten it.

As I walked towards the white front door I kicked a woman's shoe—a shoe for a very small foot. I picked it up. I was a few yards from the door when Mrs. Brackett marched out of it, stopped on the steps and then, as sharp as a sergeant, shouted "Jimmy!" She was looking up at the sky as though expecting to bring her husband down from it.

She was barefooted, wearing a blue-and-white check shirt and dusty jeans; her short fair hair was untidy, and she was making an ugly mouth like a boy's on her pretty face. I was holding out the shoe as I went forward. There was no answer to her shout. Then she saw me and stared at the shoe.

"Who are you? What are you doing with that?" she said. "Put it down."

But before I could answer there was the sound of a car starting and driving off from the other side of the buildings on the back road to the house. Mrs. Brackett heard this. She turned and marched into the house, but in a few seconds she was back, running past me across the lawn. She jumped into her car, reversed—and then she saw mine blocking the drive. She sounded her horn again and again, a dog barked, she jumped down and bawled at me.

"You bloody fool," she shouted. "Get that van of yours out of the way."

The language that came out of her small mouth was like what you hear in the cattle market on Fridays. I slowly went up and got into my van. I could hear her swearing and the other car tearing off; already it must have turned into the main road. I got into mine and there we sat, face to face, scowling at each other through our windscreens.

I reversed down the long winding drive, very fast, keeping one eye on her all the time, and turned sharply off the road at the entrance. I don't mind saying that I was showing off. I can reverse a car at speed and put it anywhere to within an inch of where I want to.

I saw her face change as she came on, for in her temper she was coming fast, radiator to radiator, down the drive straight at

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me. She gave one glance of surprise at the end and I think held back a word she had ready, as she drove past. At any rate her mouth was open. Half a dozen cows started from under the trees and trotted round the field in panic as she went by, and the rooks came out of the elms like a cloud of black paper.

By bad luck, you see, I had arrived in the middle of one of the regular Brackett rows. They were famous in the neighbourhood. The Bracketts chased each other round the house, things came out of windows, clothes, boots, anything. Our roundsman said he had once seen a portable radio playing full on come through the window and that it had fallen, still playing, in the roses. Servants went down to the town and said they had had enough of it. Money was usually at the bottom of their troubles. There was a tale going round that when a village girl who worked there got married, Mrs. Brackett gave her a three-shilling alarm clock for a wedding present.

The rows always went the same way. A car would race out of the drive with Noisy in it and five minutes later Mrs. Brackett would be in her car chasing him and no one was safe on the roads for twenty miles around. Sometimes it might end quietly in a country pub, Mrs. Brackett in one bar and Noisy in the other, white-faced, and playing hymns on the piano to mock her until she gave in.

Other times it might go on through the night. Noisy who raced cars was the better driver, but she was wilder. She would do anything—she once cut through the footpath of the cemetery to catch him on the other side. She sometimes caught him, but more than once her closeness about money would leave her standing. There would be a telephone call to Briggs' garage. Mrs. Brackett had run out of petrol. She was too mean to have much more than a gallon in the tank.

"Bless her," Noisy used to say if anyone mentioned these chases to him. "I always rely on the Fairy Queen to run out of gas."

Noisy was a woman-hater. His trouble was his habit of saying, "Bless you," to the whole female sex.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," my mother said when I got home. I put Mrs. Brackett's shoe on the table.

"I've made some progress," I said.

My mother looked at the shoe for a long time. Now I had got something out of Mrs. Brackett, Mother began to think a little less of her.

"You'd think a woman with feet like that would dress better," he said. But what annoyed me was that at some stage in the

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afternoon's chase, Noisy had slipped in and got Mother to cash him a cheque for £20.

This was a busy time of year for us. Noisy and Mrs. Brackett must have settled down again somehow because I saw them driving through the town once or twice and when I did I said to myself, "You wait till the rush is over."

Next month I went up to the Bracketts' house a second time. Rosie, the dark girl who works in our café, came with me because she wanted to meet her aunt at the main-line station three or four miles over the hill beyond Heading Mount and I was taking Rosie on there after I had spoken to Mrs. Brackett. I drove up to the house.

The sun struck warm in front of the house. It was wonderfully quiet. The main part of the garden is at the side. I left the girl in the van reading a book, and was working out a sentence to say when I saw Mrs. Brackett kneeling by a goldfish pond at the far side of the great lawn. She turned and saw me.

I did not know whether to go over the lawn to her or to wait where I was. I decided to go over and she got up and walked to me. Mother was right about her clothes. This time she was wearing a gaudy, tomato-coloured cotton dress which looked like someone else's, and nothing on underneath it.

I do not know why it was—whether it was because I was standing on the grass she was walking over, whether it was the anxiety about how to begin the conversation, or because of her bare white arms, the dawdling manner of her walk, and the inquisitiveness of her eyes—but I thought I was going to faint.

When she was two yards away, my heart jumped, my throat closed, and my head was swimming. Although I knew her by sight driving through the town, I had never really looked at her before.

She stopped, but I had the feeling that she had *not* stopped but was invisibly walking on until she walked clean through me. My arms went weak. She was amused by the effect she had on me.

"I know who you are. You are Mr. Fraser's son," she said. "Do you want to speak to me?"

I did but I couldn't. I forgot all the sentences I had prepared.

"I've come about our cheque," I said at last. I shouted it.

Mrs. Brackett was as startled by my shout as I was. She blushed with the loudness and shock of it, not a light blush but a dark, red, flooding blush on her face and her neck that confused and made her lower her head like a child caught stealing. She put her hands behind her back like a child. I blushed, too. She walked up and down a yard or two, her head still bent, thinking. Then she turned away to the house.

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"You'd better come inside," she called back in an offhand way.

You could have put our house into the hall and sitting-room of Heading Mount. I had been in that room when I was a boy helping the waiters when my father was there doing the catering for a party. I do not know what you'd have to pay for the furniture there—thousands, I suppose. She led me through the room to a smaller room beyond it where there was a desk. I felt I was slowly walking miles. I have never seen such a mess of papers and letters. They were even spread on the carpet. She sat down at the desk.

"Can you see the bill?" she muttered, not looking at me and pointing to the floor.

"I've got it here," I said, taking the bill out of my pocket. She jerked her head. The flush had gone and she looked as keen as needles at me.

"Well, sit down," she said.

She took the bill from me and glanced at it. Now I could see that her skin was not white but was really pale clay-coloured with scores of little cracks in it, and that she was certainly nearer forty than thirty, as Mother always said.

"I've paid this," she said, giving the bill a mannish slap. "I pay every quarter."

"It has been running for three and a half years," I said, more at ease now.

"What?" she said. "Oh well, I paid something, anyway. This isn't a bill. It's a statement."

"Yes," I said. "We have sent you the bills."

"Where's the date? This hasn't got any date on it."

I pointed to the date.

"It ought to be at the top," she said.

My giddiness had gone. Noisy came into the room.

"Hullo, Bob. I've just been talking to that beautiful thing you have got in the car," Noisy said. He always spoke in an alert, exhausted way about women, like someone at a shoot waiting for the birds to come over.

"Have you seen Bob's girl, darling? I've just offered her the key to my heart," he said. And he lifted the silk scarf which he was wearing in the neck of his canary-coloured pullover and there was a piece of string round his neck with a heavy old door key hanging from it. Noisy gave a twitch to one side of his face.

"Oh God, that old gag," said Mrs. Brackett.

"Not appreciated, old boy," said Noisy to me.

"Irresistible," said Mrs. Brackett with an ugly mouth.

"Let me try this one on you," she said to me, but glancing shrewdly at Noisy.

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"You've got my husband's cheques on this. I send him down to pay you and he just cashes them?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Brackett," I said. "That wouldn't be possible."

"You can't get away with that one, my pet," said Noisy. "Are you ready? What a target, Bob."

He was looking at her dress.

"I don't think we will ask Mr. Fraser's opinion," she said coldly, but very pleased. And walked out of the room with Noisy towards the garden door.

"You had better send me the bills," she called back to me, turning round.

I felt very, very tired. I left the house and slammed the car door when I got in.

"Now she wants the damn bills," I said to Rosie as I drove her up to Tolton station and did not speak to her the rest of the way. She irritated me, sitting there.

When I got home and told my mother, she was short with me. That was the way, she said, to lose customers. I was ruining all the work she and Dad had put into the business. I said if Mrs. Brackett wanted her bills she could come and get them herself. Mother was very shocked. She let it go for a day or two.

"What are you sulking about?" she said. "You upset Rosie this morning. Have you done those bills for Mrs. Brackett yet?"

I made excuses and went over for the day to the millers and to the people who make our boxes, to get away from the nagging. Once I was out of the town in the open country, Mrs. Brackett seemed to be somewhere just ahead of me, round a corner, over a hill, beyond a wood. There she was, trying to make me forget she owed us £228 17s. 4d. The moment she was in my head the money went out of it.

When I got back late in the evening, Mother was on to me again. Noisy had been in. She said he had been sent down by his wife to ask why I had not brought the bills.

"The poor Wing Commander," my mother said. "Another rumpus up there." She always gave him his rank if there was a rumour of another quarrel at Heading. "She never gives him any peace. He's just an errand boy. She does what she likes with him."

"He's been offering you the key to his heart, Mother," I said.

"I don't take any stock of him," Mother said. "Or that sweetheart stuff. Dad was the one and only for me. I don't believe in second marriages. I've no time for jealous women, they're always up to something, like Mrs. Doubleday thinking I spoke to her husband in the bank and she was caught with

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the chemist, but you always think the Fairy Prince will turn up, it's natural."

It often took a little time getting at what was in Mother's mind, yet it was really simple. She was a good churchwoman and she thought Noisy was not really married to Mrs. Brackett because he had been divorced by his first wife. She did not blame Noisy for this, in fact she admired it in a romantic way; but she blamed Mrs. Brackett because, by her theories, Mrs. Brackett was still single. And Mother never knew whether to admire single women for holding out or to suspect them of being on the prowl.

One thing she was certain of: "Money talks," she said.

The thing that made Noisy respectable for her, and as good as being married in church, was that he had married Mrs. Brackett for her money.

She talked like this the night we sat up and did the bills; but the next day—and this was the trouble with Mother—it ended in a row. I sent the bills up by the delivery van.

"That is not the way to behave," she said. "You should have taken them yourself."

And before the day was out, Mother was in a temper again. Mrs. Brackett had spoken to her on the telephone and said she had been through the bills and that we had charged her for things she hadn't had because she'd been in the south of France at the time. "I told you to go," Mother said to me.

I was angry, too, at being called dishonest. I got out the van and said I was going up at once.

"Oh, that's how it is," said my mother, changing round again. "Her ladyship snaps her fingers and you go up at once. She's got you running about for her like Noisy. If I ask you to do anything you don't pay any attention to me. But Mrs. Brackett—she's the Queen of England. Two of you running after her."

Mother was just like that with Father when he was alive. He took no notice. Neither did I.

I went up to Heading. A maid let me in and I sat waiting in the drawing-room. I waited a long time, listening to the bees coming down the chimney, circling lower and lower and then roaring out into the room like Noisy's car.

I could hear Mrs. Brackett talking on the telephone in her study. I could hear now and then what she was saying. She was a great racing woman and from words she said, here and there, I would say she was speaking to a bookmaker. One sentence I remember, because it had the name of a horse in it, and when I got back home later I looked up the racing news to see if I could find it.

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"Tray Pays On," she said. She came out into the room with the laughter of her telephone call still on her face. I was standing up with our account book in my hand, and when she saw me the laughter went.

I was not afraid of her any more.

"I hear there is some trouble about the bills," I said. "If you've got them you can check it with the book. I've brought it."

Mrs. Brackett was a woman who watched people's faces. She put on her dutiful, serious, and obedient look and led me again to the little room where the papers were. She sat down and I stood over her while we compared the bills and the book. I watched the moving of her back as she breathed. I pointed to the items one by one and she nodded and ticked the bills with a pencil.

We checked for nearly half an hour. The only thing she said was in the middle of it. "You've got a double-jointed thumb. So have I," but still went on.

"I can see what it is," I said at the end. "You've mistaken '57 for '58."

She pushed the book away and leaned back in the chair against my arm which was resting on it.

"No, I haven't," she said, her small unsmiling face looking up into mine. "I just wanted you to come up."

She gazed at me a long time. I thought of all the work Mother and I had done; and then that Mother was right about Mrs. Brackett. I took my hand from the chair and stepped back.

"I wanted to ask you one or two things," she said confidingly, "about that property next to the shop. I'll be fair with you. I'm interested in it," she said. "Are you? All right, don't answer. I see you are."

My heart jumped. Ever since I could remember, Father and Mother had talked of buying this property. It was their day-dream. They simply liked little bits of property everywhere, but I wanted it so that we could join the shop and the café.

"I asked because . . ." she hesitated. "I'll be frank with you. The bank manager was talking about it to me today."

My fright died down. I didn't believe that the bank manager—he was Mr. Rollick's brother-in-law—would let my mother down and allow the property to go to Mrs. Brackett without giving us the offer first.

"We want it, of course," I said.

And then I suspected this was one of her tricks. "That is why I have been getting our bills in," I said.

"Oh, I didn't think that was it," she said. "I thought you

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were getting married. My husband says you are engaged to the girl you brought up here. He said he thought you were. Has she any money?"

"Engaged!" I said. "I'm not. Who told him that?"

"Oh," she said, and then a thought must have struck her. I could read it at once. In our town, if you cough in the High Street, the chemist up at the Town Hall has got a bottle of cough mixture wrapped up and waiting for you: news travels fast. Mother must have known that when Noisy came down dangling the key to his heart he had been round the corner all the time seeing Rosie.

"I'm glad to hear you're not engaged," Mrs. Brackett said tenderly. "I like a man who works. You work like your father did—what an attractive man! You're like him. I'm not flattering you. I saw it when you came up the first time."

She asked me a lot of questions about the shop and who did the baking now.

I told her I didn't do it and that I wanted to enlarge the restaurant. "The machine bakeries are getting more and more into the country," I said. "And you've got to look out."

"I don't see why you shouldn't do catering for schools," she said. "And there's the Works—" her father's main factory—"why don't you get hold of the catering there?"

"You can only do that if you have capital. We're not big enough," I laughed.

"How much do you want?" she said. "Two thousand, three? I don't see why we couldn't do something."

The moment she said "we" I came to my senses. Here's a funny turn out, I thought, she won't pay her bills, but first she's after these shops and now she's waving two thousand pounds in my face. Everyone in our town knew she was artful. I suppose she thought I was green.

"Not as much as two thousand," I said. "Just the bill," I said, nodding to it.

Mrs. Brackett smiled. "I like you. You're interested in money. Good. I'll settle it." And taking her cheque book from the desk she put it in her drawer. "I never pay these accounts by cheque. I pay in cash. I'll get it tomorrow at the bank. I'll tell you what I'll do," she said. "You've got a shoe of mine. Bring it up tomorrow evening at, say, half past eight; I'll be back by then and you can have it." She paused and then got up, adding quickly, "Half tomorrow, half in November."

It was like dealing with the gipsies that come to your door.

"No, Mrs. Brackett," I said. "I'd like all of it. Now."

We stared at each other. It was like that moment months

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ago when she had driven at me in her car and I had reversed up the drive with one eye watching her and one on the road as I shot back. That was the time, I think, I noticed her; when she opened her mouth to shout a word at me and then did not shout. I could have stayed like this looking into her small, pretty, miser's blue eyes, at her determined head, her chopped-off fair hair, for half an hour. It was a struggle.

She was the first to speak and that was a point gained to me. Her voice shook a little.

"I don't keep that amount of money in the house," she said.

I knew that argument. Noisy said she always had two or three hundred pounds in the safe in the wall of her study and, whether this was so or not, I could not help glancing towards it.

"I don't like being dictated to," she said, catching my glance. "I have told you what I will do."

"I think you could manage it, Mrs. Brackett," I said.

I could see she was on the point of flying into one of her tempers and as far as I was concerned—I don't know why—I hoped she would. Her rows with Noisy were so famous that I must have wanted to see one for myself, and I didn't see why she should get away with it. At the back of my mind I thought of all the others down in the town and how they would look when I said I had got my money out of Mrs. Brackett. Yet I wasn't really thinking about the money at all, at this moment. I was looking at her pretty shoulders.

But Mrs. Brackett did not fly into a temper. She considered me and then, in a quiet voice which took me off my guard, "Actually," she said, lowering her eyes, "you haven't been coming up here after money at all, have you?"

"Well," I began.

"Ssh," she said, jumping up from her chair and putting her hand on my mouth. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I am often alone."

She stepped to the door and bawled out, "Jimmy!" as if he was a long way off. He was, to my surprise and even more to hers, very near.

"Yes, duckie?" Noisy called back from the hall.

"Damn," she said to me. "You must go," and squeezing my hand she went through the drawing-room into the hall.

"What time do we get back tomorrow evening?" she said boldly to Noisy. "Half past eight? Come at half past eight," she said, turning to me, for I had followed her. "I'll bring back the cash."

The sight of Noisy was a relief to me and the sound of the word cash made Noisy brighten.

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" Not lovely little bits of money? " he exclaimed.

" Not for you," said Mrs. Brackett, glancing at him.

" How did you work it, old boy? " said Noisy, giving me one of his most quizzical twitches as he walked with me to my van. When I drove off I could see him still standing there, watching me out of sight.

I drove away very slowly. My mind was in confusion. About half a mile off, I stopped the van and lit a cigarette. All the tales I had heard about Mrs. Brackett came back into my mind. It was one thing to look at her, another thing to know about her. The one person I wished I had with me was Noisy. He seemed like a guarantee of safety, a protection. To have had my thoughts read like that by her filled me with fear.

I finished my cigarette. I decided not to go straight home, and I drove slowly all along the lower side of the oakwoods and so carelessly that I had to swerve to avoid oncoming cars. I was making, almost without knowing it, for The Green Man at Mill Cross.

There was a girl there I had spoken to once or twice. I went in and asked for a glass of beer. I hardly said a word to her, except about the weather, and she left the bar to look after a baby in the kitchen at the back. That calmed me. I think the way she gave me my change brought me back to earth and made me feel free of Mrs. Brackett's spell. At any rate, I put the threepence in my pocket and swallowed my beer. I laughed at myself. Mrs. Brackett had gypped me again.

When I got home it was late and my mother was morose. She was wearing a black dress she often wore when alone; she was dressed up and ready to go out yet not intending to; as if now my father was dead she was free if someone would invite her. Her best handbag was beside her.

She was often waiting like this, sitting on the sofa, doing nothing but listen to the clock tick and perhaps getting up to give a touch to some flowers on the table and then sitting down again. Her first words shook me.

" Mrs. Brackett was down here looking for you," she said sharply. " I thought you were with her. She wants you to be sure to go up tomorrow evening to collect some money when she comes back from Tolton. Where have you been? "

" Let her post it or bring it in," I said.

Mother was horrified at the idea of Mrs. Brackett soiling her hands with money.

" You'll do as I tell you," my mother said. " You'll go up and get it. If you don't, Noisy will get his hands on it first. You'd

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think a woman with all that money would go to a decent hairdresser. It's meanness, I suppose."

And then, of course, I saw I was making a lot of fuss about nothing. Noisy would be there when I went up to Heading. Good old Noisy, I thought, thank God for that. And he'll see I get the money because she said it in front of him.

So that next evening I went. I put my van near the garage, and the first person I saw was Noisy standing beside his own car. He had a suitcase in his hand. I went over to him.

"Fairy Queen's been at work," he said. He nodded at his tyres. They were flat. "I'm doing some quick thinking."

At that moment a top window of the house was opened and someone emptied a suitcase of clothes out of it and a shower of cigarettes came down.

"She's tidying," he said. "I've got a quarter of an hour to catch the London train. Be a sweety-pie and run me over there."

I had arrived once more in the middle of one of the Brackett rows. Only this time Noisy was leaving it to me. That is how I felt about it.

"Hop in," I said.

And when we were off and a mile from Heading, he sat up in the seat and looked round.

"Nothing on our tail," he said.

"Have you ever heard of a horse called Tray?" I asked him. "Tray Pays something? Tray Pays On—that can't be it."

"Tray Pays On," repeated Noisy. "Is it a French horse?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Bloody peasant," said Noisy. "Doesn't sound frog to me." We got to Tolton station. He was looking very white and set with hatred. Not until he was standing in the queue getting his ticket did it occur to me what Noisy was doing.

He called across from the queue, "The first time I've travelled by train for fifteen years. Damned serious."

And before he went to the train he said, "Are you going back? No business of mine—but I'll give you a tip. If you do, you won't find anything in the kitty, Bob."

He gave me his stare and his final twitch. It was like the crack of a shot. Bang on, as he would have said. A bull's-eye.

I walked slowly away as the London train puffed out. I took his advice. I did not go back to Heading.

There were rows and rows between the Bracketts, but there was none like this one. The others were a chase. This was not. For only Mrs. Brackett was on the road that night. She was seen, we were told, in all the likely places. She had been a dozen

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times through the town. Soon after ten o'clock she was hooting outside our house; Mother peeped through the curtains, and I went down to her. Mrs. Brackett got out of her car and marched at me.

"Where have you been?" she shouted. "Where is my husband?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Yes, you do," she said. "You took him to Tolton, they told me."

"I think he's gone to London," I said.

"Don't be a damn liar," she said. "How can he have? His car is up there."

"By train," I said.

"By train," she repeated. Her anger vanished. She looked at me with astonishment. The rich are very peculiar. She had forgotten people travel by train.

"I see," she said sarcastically. "That's what he plotted with you." She looked me up and down. "You've got your money and you don't care," she said.

"What money?" I said.

"What money!" she exclaimed, and then a sly look came to her, a smile, a wide smile, and suddenly she went into peals of laughter.

"Oh, that's too good. That's wonderful," she laughed. "He swiped the lot. Oh no!"

And she turned and looked up to the sky in admiration of that flying man. Then she looked back at me and grinned.

"It was all or nothing with you," she said, "and you get nothing, don't you?"

And that was the last of her.

By the end of the week everyone was laughing at me. Mrs. Brackett paid every penny she owed to all the shops in the town. People came up and thanked me, asking me how I worked it.

"You did the trick, boy," they said.

"He's a good-looking fellow," they said.

Paid everyone, I say. Bar me.

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* * *

MALACCA POLITENESS!

Something I find most distasteful today is the habit of going about in a top hat and tails without a cane.

SIR COMPTON MACKENZIE,
in How to be a Deb's Mum

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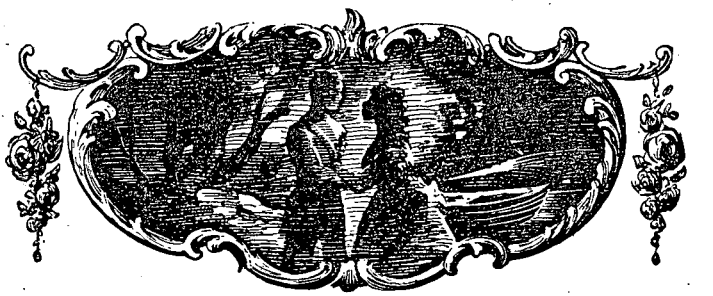

Love in the Mist

. . . And the only, only thing that I ever did wrong
Was to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew . . .

But o'er her meek eyes came a happy mist
Like that which kept the heart of Eden green
Before the useful trouble of the rain.

ALFRED TENNYSON, *Geraint and Enid*

Up in the Clouds

The sunset faded, the purple mists stole on down the slopes of the hills, the west wind rose, bringing a rich odour from the pine forests; the Bohemian musicians, for a few coins, sang airs sweet enough to have been played by the legendary music-demons . . . the boat dropped slowly down the stream in the evening twilight, and Strathmore leant over the vessel's side, talking on to his chance acquaintance, and looking down on to the exquisite Titian-like picture that she made, reclining on her pile of cushions, with the black mantilla of lace thrown over her yellow hair, and her dark, lustrous eyes gleaming softly and dreamily . . .

" Destiny throws us together, monsieur! We must be good friends. Dieu le veut! " she laughed, as Strathmore lifted her from the plank on to the landing-place, while the white, soft hands lay in his, and the delicate fragrance of the perfumed hair floated across him . . .

" I am the debtor of destiny, then! " he whispered in answer,

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noting the sweet grace and luxurious outline of her perfect form that even the dark drapery of her travelling-dress could not avail to hide . . .

He paused abruptly, crushing her with fierce unconscious strength against his breast, gazing down into the face so fatally fair. Her eyes looked into his with all their eloquence of loveliness . . . and his lips met hers in kisses that only died to be renewed again, each longer, sweeter, more lingering than the last.

And that night at the tempting of a woman he bowed and fell.

OUIDA, *Strathmore*

Missed Appointment?

Skylark! Have you anything to say to me?
Won't you tell me where my love can be?
Is there a meadow in the mist
Where someone's waiting to be kissed?

Song

Domestic Smoke-screen

Recoiling into the sitting-room he found himself enveloped in a kind of London fog, through which he dimly descried dark forms struggling about the hearth like genies of the mist. He said "Hallo!" and was instantly seized by a fit of coughing. Out of the thick rolls of smoke came a figure that he vaguely remembered promising to love and cherish at some earlier period in the day. Her eyes were streaming and her progress blind. He extended an arm and they coughed convulsively together.

DOROTHY L. SAYERS, *Busman's Honeymoon*

Bridal Haze

The haze upon the meadow
Denies the dying year
For the sun's within it, something bridal
Is more than dreaming here.
There is no end, no severance,
No moment of deliverance,
No quietus made
Though quiet abounds and deliverance moves
In that sunny shade.

EDMUND BLUNDEN, *What is Winter?*

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The Vapours

If the heart of a man is depressed with cares
The mist is dispelled when woman appears.

JOHN GAY, *The Beggar's Opera*

Red Mist of Passion—

His splendid eyes blazed with the passion of a wild beast. She knew if she resisted him he would kill her . . .

"Touch me again, and I will shoot!" she gasped, and sank down on the bench almost exhausted behind the rough wooden table . . .

"This is very clever of you, Madame," he said; "but do you think it will avail you anything? You can sit like that all night, if you wish, but before dawn I will take you."

Tamara never stirred, and the strain of keeping the pistol to her head made her wrist ache. For a long time there was silence, and the great heat caused a mist to swim before her eyes, and an overpowering drowsiness—Oh, heaven!—if unconsciousness should come upon her! Presently Tamara's elbow slipped, and the pistol jerked forward. In a second the Prince had sprung into an alert position . . . Strange lights seemed to flash before her eyes. Yes,—surely—that was Gritzko coming towards her—!

The pistol dropped from her nerveless grasp.

So his was the end! He would win.

She gave one moan—and fell forward unconscious . . . With a bound Gritzko leaped up, and seizing her in his arms carried her into the middle of the room. Then he paused a moment to exult in his triumph.

ELINOR GLYN, *His Hour*

—Cloudy Aftermath

Alas, how easily things go wrong!
A sigh too much, or a kiss too long,
And there follows a mist and a weeping rain
And life is never the same again.

GEORGE MACDONALD, *Phantastes*

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OLD WARRIOR

The panther launched itself—
a dark shadow of speed and hate

BY DAVID WALKER

NEIL'S father sat in one armchair, his mother in another, Neil in the third with his legs under him. The log fire was burning big, and the wet hill air blew in through open windows. The tree frogs were loud outside. Everything was near and sharp and loud. Going away to school tomorrow.

Then the door creaked. Toby ambled straight over to the fireplace, flopped as usual like a ton of bricks, let the bone roll on to the rug, and lay, nose against it. He grunted with satisfaction and drooled a bit at the ripe smell of his prize. It was a high old bone all right.

Mrs. Mackenzie had been reading, lost deep in her book. But she sniffed; then erupted with volcanic indignation, "On my best Bokhara rug! Oh, that stinking animal!"

"He's not stinking! You're st——"

"That'll do," said Father. "Remove the offending object."

Neil removed it between finger and thumb. It was true about Toby being smelly nowadays, but this time it was the bone and not him—both reasons for being angry at Mum.

He took the thing out to the edge of the lawn, got a firmer grip, threw it as far as he could, wiped his hand on the grass, and felt a bit better.

Inside, Major Mackenzie was saying, "It's a sensitive subject, Celia. Don't you realise the dog means more to him at this moment than you or I or——"

She sighed. "I know, darling. Have you spoken to him?"

"I will."

Toby was asleep when Neil came back. Toby was eleven. Toby's father had been a bulldog, his mother a bull terrier. The result was seventy pounds of muscled ugliness. When he walked through Darjeeling with Neil, ignoring grown-ups but wishing to greet children, he caused alarm among strangers. "He only wants to say hullo," Neil often had to explain.

Toby was a famous dog, and a famous fighter when provoked. There was the mastiff which attacked every smaller dog it met.

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It made a mistake about Toby. Neither beating, nor pepper, nor water, nor anything else would make him let go of that mastiff's throat. Fortunately, there were dozens of witnesses to say he hadn't started it. Now he was old, dim-sighted, deaf, smelly, and stiff from battle. Age arrives early in India.

Neil thought of everything as he came in and saw his dog asleep. Toby was making dream yelps, which was a funny thing about him because in real life he hunted mute.

"I'm sorry, Neil," said his mother. "I didn't mean to say that. He's the best dog in the Himalayas . . . Aren't you, Toby?" But Toby did not hear.

Neil grunted.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" asked his father.

"I thought I might go for a walk." Toby was deaf to everything except walks. He woke up.

"Come to the office for a minute, boy."

Neil followed his father, wondering what it would be this time, and Toby followed Neil. Father shut the door. He went to the window and stared out. "Going to be more rain," he muttered. "This blasted monsoon will never end." Silence. He turned round. "Neil, I want to talk to you about Toby."

Neil looked at the tiger skins and at the snow leopard which was his father's rarest trophy. He knew what was coming. It was what Mr. Chatterjee had said last week at the animal hospital. He looked at the Gurkha kukris on the wall. He looked up.

"Yes, Father?"

". . . It's your decision, Neil. Think about it and tell me before you leave tomorrow."

"Why can't they just be like old people?"

Jim Mackenzie turned again to the window. "I remember asking my father that once—your grandfather—and he said, because they can't tell us about their aches and pains. One reason, Neil, and a good one. Let me know what you decide."

"Yes, Father." Neil did not look at Toby.

"Do you want to take the .256 this afternoon in case you see a karkar?"

"Oh gosh, yes!" Neil's own .22 was too small for deer.

"Here you are." His father gave him the Mannlicher carbine from the gun rack, and half a dozen soft-nosed shells. "No firing at dangerous game; not that you'll see any."

"O.K. Thanks awfully." He slung the rifle. It felt good.

Neil put on his jungle boots, slung the old fieldglasses round his neck, strapped the rolled ground-sheet round his middle, and shouted good-bye to Mum.

She came to the door. "Well," she said, being silly, "if it

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isn't Jim Corbett himself. What are you hunting today, colonel?"

"I'm going after a barking deer," Neil said, ignoring that crack about Jim Corbett, the tiger hunter. But his mother's face changed. It never stayed the same for long, and now he saw it change to wanting to come with him. He might have offered to take her, because she was what Father called "a good jungle woman," but he didn't. "See you later," he said.

"Be back by six, darling. And please stick to the paths. I heard that panther twice last night." She made a harsh pantherish rasp exactly right, and laughed, and looked rather sad again. "The house is going to be so quiet after tomorrow."

He escaped. Toby gave one deep woof, and gambolled about like his old bouncing self, or his young self, as he always did for a minute at the beginning of a walk. Then he sobered down to a double limp from the mastiff wound on his right shoulder and a panther swipe on his left quarter.

I wonder if Sher Bahadur could come? Neil thought. So he went by the weighing shed. Sher Bahadur had been his father's orderly in the Gurkhas. He was a square, short man, just about as broad as he was long. He sprang to his feet and quivered into a superb salute. "General Sahib!" It was an ancient joke and still funny.

"Oh, great brave tiger Sher Bahadur, and chopper of many heads by night," said Neil in Nepalese, "can you come hunting?"

"Not this baby, Nee-ul," said Sher Bahadur. He had picked up that one in the Italian campaign and was proud of it, almost his entire spoken English vocabulary, although he could understand a bit. "There is a dangerous Major Mackenzie in these hills who orders that I weigh tea this afternoon."

Toby had come over to say hullo. He ignored non-family adults, but Sher Bahadur was a friend of many walks. He patted Toby once on the head. "Old Warrior."

Neil told him what his father had said. He couldn't have talked about it to anybody else. "I have to decide."

"You are a man, Nee-ul, and you will decide."

"Come on, Toby." He wasn't a man, and he didn't want to decide.

They left the buildings and followed a path through trees. The hillside was bursting green with growth. You could hear a seeping trickle of water everywhere under the cicadas trilling "rain" more loudly now than ever. Three months' rain, a hundred inches, and more to come before the monsoon rolled back in October. The mist had thinned to wisps of cloud climbing out of the valleys. Far away south and six thousand feet down, there was sunshine on the plains, a different, sticky world.

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Neil and Toby came to terraced slopes where tea bushes were dark green and the hillwomen were picking green tips and chattering nineteen to the dozen while their fingers flew at the work. He quickened pace because lately they seemed to stare and giggle and make remarks.

Somebody did now. "Aaaiii!" she called. "See the beautiful boy sahib!" Which was quite embarrassing, and meant for his ears. They knew he understood the hill tongue as well as they did. Cackles of laughter.

"So many fat, lazy old cows mooing!" he said loudly. It was a great success.

He reached the end of the tea garden. The country beyond was too steep for cultivation. The path swung into the head of a gully where the stream gathered, and out round the next shoulder.

Neil stopped to look back at the red-roofed house and buildings. You never thought much about home until there was only a week to go. Then it was the last day suddenly. And after Christmas you were going to school in England.

"Good boy, Toby," he said. "We'll have a rest in a minute." Toby wagged his tail. He was wheezing. There were no level walks, but this was the easiest one. They crossed the shoulder.

Neil unrolled the ground-sheet. It was Father's, from the war, too noisy a thing for stalking, but waterproof and very good for wearing when you sat still because of the blotched brown and green camouflage.

He did not wear it now, but sat on one half and put Toby on the other. The hillside dropped off almost vertically for a few hundred feet; farther down there were trees again, and ferns among the rocks, and lush green grass. Somewhere out beyond all that, two hillmen were having an across-the-valley conversation, voices pitched high; they might be five miles from here. But the sounds of home, which was only just round the corner, were cut off completely.

Neil watched. There were many tints of green, brown, grey; some of the wet rocks were black. Nothing was the colour he wanted—the russet red of a karkar, the barking deer that lurked so daintily in shaded places. He would have had a much better chance lower down, but this was Toby's walk, and Toby was not able. Toby snoozed.

Neil spied through the glasses for a while, searching clump by clump methodically, but nothing doing. "Monkeys," he said, putting his hand on the dog's square head. Toby did not have the cramped, shallow skull of a modern bull terrier. He had a head on him, ugly though it was. At the word "monkeys" he opened his right eye in the centre of its black patch, and rumbled.

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Toby had it in for monkeys, particularly for the big grey langur males, who had it in for him. These now were langurs, too far away for the dog to see. They swung through trees and over the ridge. After that, a party of minivets flashed across, the males bright scarlet, the females yellow. Neil had a good feeling of birds and beasts and him and Toby. It was time to go on.

They came to a sandy ravine. There were pug marks and the tracks of lesser game.

"Toby!" he said loudly. "Want to go on? You old fool, Toby." Calling him an old fool was the way to make Toby smile. He did now: a hideous, disreputable leer before he rolled on ahead. The path swung into the next cascading stream, wound out to the next spur or shoulder: the teeth of a giant lumberman's saw—it was that kind of hill country.

Toby led. He could decide for himself how far he wanted to walk. That, anyway, could be Toby's decision. They went through loud water, and now were following the shoulder. The air was damp and thin and cool. Clouds were piling in, grey again. The distant plains were not visible.

Toby's head had been low, but suddenly it came up; the skin wrinkled on his shoulders; he sniffed. Then he gave a whimper, quite an insignificant noise. He made it only when he caught a hateful scent—monkey or panther or bear or pig.

"Steady, boy," said Neil, putting him on the leash. Nowadays he ran into things and hurt himself.

The dog pulled hard. He was still tremendously strong. I wonder if I should turn back? thought Neil. Then he thought, Perhaps this is our last time, and it'll only be some old monkey scent; he'll quieten down in a minute. But he unslung the carbine and held it in his right hand.

Toby did not quieten down. The hackles bristled dark all along his back, and he took charge, blundering along the path. It narrowed from three feet to two feet to one foot, and there was the point of the shoulder now.

"Stop, Toby!" Toby heard, and eased a little.

Neil knew this place. You crossed the shoulder, and then for twenty yards or so, as you swung in again, you were not on a path, but on a ledge below a vertical cliff, above steep scree. They would stop there to have a last spy for karkar and then turn home. Toby whimpered again, but was well in hand as they reached the apex of the spur. They turned.

It was not old monkey scent. At the far end of the ledge stood a panther.

A great many things flashed across Neil's mind in that second. Too narrow for the brute to turn. Too steep for it to climb.

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Could come on. Might break down the scree. Himself with leash in one hand, carbine in the other. Had to hold Toby. Horrible, slender, wicked panther . . .

He was hauling his hardest on Toby when the panther crouched, tail switching, coiled to—

Toby attacked, tearing the leash from Neil's fingers. As Neil stumbled forward, he watched his dog hurl himself along the ledge, bunched bone and muscle, silent but for scrabbling claws.

The hill panther had hunted and killed many dogs for its favourite meat. But it had never seen a dog like this, a dingy-white monstrosity with one black eye, a braver fighter than it was itself. The panther charged also—a hundred and forty pounds against seventy. The cat snarling, the dog mute. They met in a thudding fury of fangs and claws; then the two twisting, contrasted bodies rolled over the edge and down the scree.

Neil watched them go—writhing, tangled, the dog at the panther's throat—heads over tails in a showering rattle of loose stones. He dared not fire. But a moment later he realised that he should have risked the shot, because there could be only one end to this. However brave Toby was, however firm his throat-hold, the panther would break him.

But Neil was too late. He saw it happen before they reached the bottom of the scree. The pale body swung out and away from the tawny body, and the cat had the space it needed. Fore-paw smacked hindquarters. It was a vicious stroke, nearly too fast to see. Toby's jaw-grip was loosening already as they tumbled out of sight into green undergrowth.

Silence. Only the drip-drip of water and the eternal tree frogs. No movement at all below. Neil ran down the moving scree, stumbled, recovered, slithered to the bottom. He shouted. It was a cracked imitation of a shout to scare the panther. Then he was into bushes, ferns, grass, thorns, carbine at his waist, forcing a passage down. Now a rustling clump of bamboo, but no white Toby, no deadly panther.

My fault, he thought. All my fault. His coat was torn, his face scratched, his body soaked. He went on. Was that—?

No, it was not the crouching leopard. It was a dappled rock. And that flicker of white was not old Toby. It was a paradise flycatcher, flitting away with streamer tails.

Then he saw Toby. His dog lay at the edge of the stream. Toby was alive with a broken back and many wounds. He was only just alive, but he knew Neil's hand. He opened both eyes.

"Oh, Toby." It could not be long.

Toby growled. "I smell you, enemy," he growled. There

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was another noise above the tiny splashings of the stream. It came from higher up. It was the panther swaying long grass, a bold hill panther with a sore throat, wanting its kill.

Neil held the rifle in his shoulder. He was not afraid, although his heart thumped fast. Father had said, "Never take on a panther in closed country. Never!" And this was an angry panther.

There was movement in the grass again from right to left. It might come straight or it might cross that open patch of rock to complete the circle. They generally circled first, didn't they? Neil had not shot a panther, but he had read every big-game book he could find.

The panther did not come straight. It crossed the ten yards of rock in two galloping strides.

Neil fired, saw the hindquarters slew slightly, heard it grunt. Then it was out of sight behind that clump of bamboo. He had hit it, he thought, but he knew the shot was too far back, probably a flesh wound. The brute had not even stumbled.

He looked down.

"Poor Toby," he said. "Poor boy. I'm sorry, Toby."

Neil did not have time to think about Toby's death, for the panther growled from the bamboos. And it was not thinking but feeling that said, You're not going to eat my dog. You killed him and I'm going to kill you.

But then Neil did think; he thought fast. Could he put Toby's body on his back and climb the other side of the gully where it was open ground for a shot? No, too heavy and too steep. A tree? Yes, there was a tree beside him, gnarled and small, but with a fork low down. Climb it and leave Toby where he was? But if you missed, the panther would take the dog and be gone in a flash.

Neil had made his plan. He began to carry out the plan now without ever taking his eyes off those bamboos where the panther growled again. He loosed the belt which held his ground-sheet, undid the cords, unrolled it on the steep ground, spread it wide, hauled the body, still limp, on to the centre. Then his heart jumped because the bamboo fronds were moving. But it was only the monsoon deluge beginning again, pattering on his ground-sheet, on leaves overhead, drowning lesser noises.

All this Neil had done with one hand. Now he laid down the .256, gathered the corners of the ground-sheet, tied them with the cord, making a sack for old Toby. Would it come now? If it has any sense it'll come now, he thought in a standing-outside-himself sort of way.

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But the panther did not come. Now Neil had the belt fixed, too, and buckled round his neck. He picked up the rifle, staggered to his feet, and tried to clamber into that fork. He tried desperately in the loud rain, but he was not strong enough.

Down again, belt over his head. What a clever idea about the ground-sheet sack, and what a waste of time. He took seventy pounds dead weight in his arms and managed to raise it to the fork. Then he climbed above, wedged himself, heaved, steadied it again.

Bit by bit, Neil dragged his own body and Toby's body higher. It was an easy tree to climb, the kind of tree you pretty well ran up when you heard game moving and wanted to spy. But it was not easy now.

He rested. Legs, arms, stomach, lungs all ached, and the lights of exhaustion flashed. His hand, grasping at a green, slimy bough, trembled like some old man's. The rain fell in a drenching, solid wall of noise. But gradually his breathing slowed, the shakes and aches lessened, heat dwindled into the middle of his body. No panther.

He was ten or twelve feet up the tree. The camouflaged sack that was Toby, or had been Toby, hung from a branch stump just below him. It was secure. Neil was secure enough himself—that is, he was wedged so as not to fall out. But he knew that he could be pulled out. The panther could get at him with a jump or it could get at him by climbing. I should just have slipped away, he thought. What difference would it make, when Toby was dead already? Slipped away? No, sneaked away after letting him be killed for me. I never even did anything. I just let it happen.

Neil watched the clump of bamboo. It was about on a level with his own head. No movement at all. Was the panther still there? Had it moved down left to take him from behind? Had it gone altogether? Behind! Yes, that was what the shivers in his spine said. He whipped his head round. No panther.

And now the light was fading, and every dancing leaf or blade could be dancing from rain or from a long slinking body. That sound! But there was no sound anywhere except rain.

Neil began to shiver again—this time from cold, and because he was afraid. As he shifted position, the panther growled. It was in the same place still. It was waiting for the dusk that was not far off.

Not knowing had been the bad thing. He stopped being afraid. He had the sights aligned just this side and below, finger on the trigger. If only it would show itself. If he could just get a glimpse of where the head was.

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But the panther did not move. He knew that when the time came for it to move, it would not stroll in a lord-of-the-jungle way as a tiger would stroll. It was a panther, and it had been touched up by a bull terrier at the throat and by a bullet somewhere far back. That growl had said, " I'm going to get you." It would kill for its dog meat.

Neil should have been feeling sad about Toby, but suddenly he was rather happy in a calm, murderous kind of way. He had never felt like that before. You're wrong, you stinking panther. I'm the one who's going to get you.

It was much darker. He looked at his watch. Six-twenty. " Be back by six, darling," she had said, and it was a grey, wet, early night, and she would be in an awful stew already, particularly if they'd heard the shot. They might not have.

" Don't imagine horrors, my love," Father would be telling her. He treated her as a joke when she got fussed, which was quite clever of him, although she was much cleverer than he was. What's Father going to say when I get home? If I get . . .

Neil watched. He took his left hand off for a moment to wipe the rain out of his eyes. He heard an owl scream along the hill, and jackals howling far down in the deep valley. Otherwise, rain. He was very cold. What would happen if the panther did not come? Was that voices?

Just then lights appeared. They came round the shoulder where he and Toby had met the panther, and men were shouting. They were quite close.

" Neil! " in Father's loud bellow, and " Nee-ul! " from Sher Bahadur.

Neil did not answer. He was watching the bamboos. They were indistinct. He could not make out one slim shoot from another, but something was happening there.

" Neil! "

" Nee-ul! "

" Shut up," he said under his breath as the panther launched itself, a dark, long shadow of speed and hate. His bullet flame stabbed. Reload. Hit? Panther below, not dead, very much alive. Neil swung round, straining himself to get the barrel down. He saw it crouched there, head back, snarling.

Then it climbed, paws on either side of the trunk, clawing. Like a house cat climbing from a dog, he thought in the galloping moment. But this was climbing to, not from. He fired. It came on. Eyes vertical slits. Reloaded. Stink of breath was hitting him as he fired yet again into the panther's face. It did not climb the last two feet. It stayed where it was. Then the devilish energy slackened. Neil saw that happen. He saw his

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panther slide down, claws rasping, strike the first fork, and roll back dead.

"Neil!"

He could hear them on the scree. He should answer now, but coldness and weakness were everywhere, and deep.

Father with his big rifle, Sher Bahadur with the five-celled torch. Men carrying lanterns. The light shone on the dead panther, then up to the ground-sheet sack, then blinded Neil.

"What the hell's all this?" Father did not sound pleased or relieved. He sounded red-hot angry, and when Father was angry, which hardly ever happened, then the whole shooting match exploded. "Didn't I tell you—"

"Major Sahib!" Sher Bahadur said. "See!" The beam was on Toby's shroud dangling from its branch.

"What happened?"

Neil told it. He could not say much. He was just realising what he had done to Toby. "The panther broke his back, and it was all my fault, and I—"

"Well, I'll be darned," Jim Mackenzie muttered at the end. "Help the boy down, Sher Bahadur."

Neil got down all right, but as soon as he reached the ground something went wrong. He couldn't help it. He just couldn't.

"Steady now, old fellow," Father said after a while. Tears made him feel awkward.

"A man who is a man may weep," said Sher Bahadur.

But Neil stopped crying.

"Drink this, Neil." He drank the burning stuff from a flask, and choked. The heat went through him. The coolies cut a pole to carry the panther.

"Take the rifles, Sher Bahadur. I'll carry old Toby."

Which his father did, and they climbed past bamboos sounding in the rain and up sliding scree, and here was the ledge where Toby had killed himself for you, and on towards home.

Father stopped in the darkness. "Are you all right, Neil?"

"Yes." Neil was warmer again, but he was not all right.

Jim Mackenzie did not always understand his moody, hot-headed son; he understood now. "Sher Bahadur," he said in Nepalese. "Oh, brother! Did Toby die well?"

"As one brave soldier for another," said Sher Bahadur. "And few old warriors may die thus."

★ ★ ★

CURSORY INSPECTION

Socks: What a man throws away because they're not worth a darn.

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SEEING LIFE

"They say it's quite a joint,"
he informed her largely

BY LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

MR. WILKS was, in his own way, a brave man, but it must be admitted that women made him a little uncomfortable. He was embarrassed in the presence of young things who seemed for ever to be tittering about this or that and, for all he knew, at him. This upset him even more than the way Mrs. Wilks took him for granted, although that had more continuity. Mrs. Wilks, in a manner of speaking, he had always with him.

It was not that he found life with her difficult. A placid woman, they had few arguments, and if in those she had too easy a way of pooh-poohing his opinion, one cannot have everything. Her morals were as unimpeachable as her cooking, she kept a neat house, and taking it all in all he felt for her both respect and affection.

No, she was not difficult. Perhaps the word to use was—flattening. One did not take off easily, one did not soar in her presence. Mr. Wilks knew only too well how quickly a few sensible words from her could ground him.

So when the big idea hit him, he sought to give it what you might call an educational twist.

He was reading the latest detective thriller, which Mrs. Wilks after perusing it with placid perseverance had left around, when he looked up suddenly.

"You know," he said, "I've never in my life seen one of these—these night spots. In a way it would be an education to visit one."

Mrs. Wilks smiled tolerantly as you would at a child: he knew at once that she would not be a party to it, and did not expect him to push the silly idea beyond this conversational moment. But a kind of obstinacy grew in him.

"I shall make inquiries," he said. Mrs. Wilks smiled again and went placidly on with her needlework.

The obstinacy in Mr. Wilks increased. Within the week he came home from the office and announced, "I shall be out for dinner tonight."

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"We were having stew, anyway," Mrs. Wilks told him. "It'll keep."

He waited for her to ask, "Where are you going?" but when she didn't he said, "I'm going to the Café Louis Noir."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Wilks.

"They say it's quite a joint," Mr. Wilks informed her largely.

"Well, wear your muffler," Mrs. Wilks said. "You know how easily you catch cold."

It was only when he was a full mile away in the speeding taxi that Mr. Wilks felt any lift in himself again.

He recalled with satisfaction the look of surprise on the taxi driver's face as he gave the address, a look which he now interpreted hopefully, feeling again a sense of adventure and excitement, and perhaps a faint touch of that timidity which comes from living too sheltered a life.

A damp and mournful dusk was settling over the city, and the east wind splatted a few desultory drops of cold rain against the windscreen. On the far side of town the car turned from a drab commercial thoroughfare into a darker and narrower street, splashed with a garish patch of light that proclaimed his goal.

"Know this joint?" The taxi driver eyed him, then grinned. "Better watch your teeth if there's any gold in them."

A little thrill, half chill, spread through Mr. Wilks. He at once added something to the tip, and the cab moved away, leaving him strictly on his own.

Two men—vague figures lounging on the periphery of the splash of light—paid him small attention.

Shouldn't wonder, he told himself, if they're gunmen, waiting for the finger to be put on someone.

Inside a small ornate lobby several doors invited, leading this way and that; when he saw two girls somewhat gaudily presiding over the reception, he approached, offering his hat and muffler.

"Gents through that door there," one of them said, pointing.

"Oh," he said, abashed.

The young things looked at him and at each other, and Mr. Wilks felt the tips of his ears heating up.

He could hear the girls tittering even after he retreated within the door marked GENTLEMEN, where he received from a sallow-faced deadpan attendant a ticket in exchange for his muffler and hat.

A character in a tuxedo jacket now nodded him towards a large room where he was welcomed by a fug of smoke, a murmur of voices, a low moaning from a lady singing with a five-piece band, and a headwaiter who showed him to a table. This table

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was already occupied by a stout gentleman with small eyes and a crinkle of smile.

Edging down on the chair opposite, Mr. Wilks said tentatively, "I hope you don't mind my sitting here."

"Not at all. Sit."

Mr. Wilks sat. After a moment he glanced again at his vis-à-vis. A gangster? he wondered. The kind, no doubt, that kills with a smile. Baby-face, they probably called him.

A waiter hovered uninterestedly. He looked world-weary.

Mr. Wilks accepted a menu as complicated as a railway time-table, found to his relief a plat du jour, and said, "Bring me that, please."

He was keenly aware of the stout man eyeing him appraisingly and his heart began to thud. The fellow had all the earmarks of the underworld. Deceptively suave and smiling. "Sat across the table from a fellow called Baby-face." That'd be something to take back to Mrs. Wilks.

Leaning forward suddenly at the risk of his plateful of chili con carne, the stout man inquired, "You down here seeing life?"

"In a way," Mr. Wilks admitted.

"Me, too," said the stout man, "if you can call it that. The name's Smith. SMITH'S SAUSAGE SPECIALTIES—you've heard of them, no doubt. Just beginning to advertise nationally. My card." Mr. Wilks took the card, reciprocally murmuring his own name.

They shook hands, Mr. Wilks without enthusiasm, and the stout man went back to breathing heavily over his chili con carne.

Deflated, Mr. Wilks' thoughts again turned to Mrs. Wilks.

He could almost hear her saying, "What did I tell you? Gangster, indeed."

Then, as the funny side of it struck him, he laughed, and felt obliged to explain it to Mr. Smith, who added his own rumble.

"Believe me," the stout man said, "these places are just one big racket. People like you and me, spending money to rub shoulders with the seamy side. Seamy side? Phooey. Between me and you, I came to get away from Mrs. Smith's brand of canasta, if you gather my meaning. We're staying at a hotel, and she's always getting out the cards, so I'm just here for a breather."

Mr. Wilks glanced round him. He said, clutching desperately at his illusions, "But some of these people might be—"

"Bah!" said the stout man. "Bah, and double-bah! You been reading too many crime books." He motioned to the sad-eyed waiter now draped against a nearby pillar. "Joe," he said. "You don't mind if I call you Joe? I call all waiters Joe. Tell

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me, Joe, you ever see any real life around this dump? I'm not from Missouri, I'm from the West and I'll be heading back there tomorrow, but I've got to be shown. I'm telling my friend here he could come, well, a month of nights, and see nothing much but a few drunks and disorderlies. Now own up."

"That's right," said the waiter. "A few drunks and maybe a fight now and then, but we chuck them out."

"You see?" Mr. Smith spread his hands palms up to indicate the stark truth to Mr. Wilks. He turned again to the waiter. "Look, Joe," he said, winking, "how about us thinking up something my friend here could take home to tell the wife? Something he could kind of make a story about. Colour, atmosphere, Joe. Make yourself a coupla bucks."

The waiter shook his head doubtfully.

"Five," said the stout man.

"Ten," said the waiter.

Mr. Smith was momentarily taken aback.

"Well, make it good," he said.

The waiter looked at him; then, speculatively, at Mr. Wilks. He allowed a faint smile to drift across his lips: a mere ghost of a smile. "What do you want me to say?" he asked. "You want me to tell you there's a couple of hoods outside waiting until a certain character leaves the joint? With orders to watch for a grey fedora with a cock's feather and a couple of bullet holes in it and pump lead into what's underneath?"

"Ah!" cried Mr. Wilks.

The waiter inclined his head.

"Don't ask me how I know," he said conspiratorially.

"The grapevine," offered Mr. Wilks helpfully.

Mr. Smith cocked a droll eyebrow. "He knows all the words, Joe. All the words."

That scarcely perceptible smile again flitted over the sad face of the waiter.

"About his size and shape," said the waiter, nodding towards Mr. Wilks. "The body, I mean."

Mr. Wilks shivered deliciously, but the waiter was interested now only in Mr. Smith and payment. His expression, so far as there was any expression, conveyed the hint that he had said his piece. The stout man clapped an ecstatic hand on the table, making the dishes bounce.

"Bully!" he cried. "Good man! Here, go buy yourself some cigars—on Smith's Sausages." He flicked a ten-dollar bill at the waiter, who withdrew, pocketing the tip. "I guess he earned that," Mr. Smith beamed. "Now you try that one out on the wife when you get home."

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Mr. Wilks hesitated.

" Maybe," he said, " maybe he really meant it."

" Don't be naïve," said Mr. Smith. " Pardon my language, but you'd better go home and read Hemingway. Well, I promised the little woman I wouldn't be late. I'll bet you have your instructions, too."

" I was told," said Mr. Wilks, " not to catch cold."

" Well, keep away from draughts," laughed the stout man, rising heavily and making his way out.

Mr. Wilks returned his attention to his food. It was quite good food but he toyed with it, feeling considerably deflated. Moreover, he was aware of the waiter eyeing him with what he could only suppose was amusement, an amusement he presently shared, from behind his hand, with a fellow-waiter. The tips of Mr. Wilks' ears began to glow again.

The thought of Mrs. Wilks did not help. " Well," she would be sure to ask, " how did you get along? " and he would mumble something about a quiet night. Or perhaps, " Met an interesting fellow. Smith—of Smith's Sausages." Or even, " Waiter—deadpan sort of fellow—told us quite a yarn." And Mrs. Wilks would smile again that tolerant smile of hers.

He braced himself for that ordeal, then remembered he had another minor one—a gauntlet, you might say—to be run. He must pass out from this place under the eyes of those tittering girls as he went through the lobby.

" The sooner it's over—" he told himself, and he summoned the waiter and paid the bill.

Reluctantly leaving a tip when he got his change, Mr. Wilks turned his back on the lady crooner who was urging him in a husky contralto to call it love, found his way through the fog of smoke, endured the stare of the character in the tuxedo jacket, and sought his hat and muffler.

A man following on his heels laid down his ticket at the same time. The deadpan behind the counter pushed forward two hats with Mr. Wilks' muffler impartially draped between them. Mr. Wilks reached for his own dark and respectable homburg a moment too late.

Mr. Wilks coughed.

" I think you have my hat, sir," he said politely.

" Think again," said the man. " This is yours." He pushed the other at Mr. Wilks.

" But really," protested Mr. Wilks.

" Do you want to make something of it? " glowered the man.

It was all so absurd that Mr. Wilks might have laughed. Obviously the man must be drunk; there was indeed a strong smell of

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liquor about him. He wasn't a big man, no bigger than Mr. Wilks, but he looked, to say the least, aggressive.

Mr. Wilks appealed to the attendant, who said sharply, "Take your hat and get the hell out of here, mister. Do you want to start trouble?"

The man who had taken Mr. Wilks' hat joined in.

"You heard what he said? Put that hat on and scram."

Dazed, Mr. Wilks complied. What Mrs. Wilks would say, he couldn't imagine.

Then, as he moved towards the door he caught a revealing sight of himself in the mirror.

Clearly, this hat was not what he and Mrs. Wilks would have made a careful choice of in any store. It had an extinguishing effect, and in any other circumstances he might have felt an urge to laugh. He kept on moving, uncomfortably aware of a growing truculence in the man who smelt of liquor.

He realised, too, that he must have a hat; to be without one was to catch cold—he always did—and Mrs. Wilks had told him very definitely not to catch cold.

Still dazed and annoyed, he became aware of the forgotten hazard: the two young things who had found him so amusing before were gazing at him from the other cloakroom.

They exchanged glances, and then one of them began to titter. They both tittered. Vulnerable, Mr. Wilks turned a peony red; and suddenly snatching the offending hat from his head, he crushed it under his arm and fled out the door, refusing—cold or no cold—to replace the headgear until he had hailed and climbed into a cruising taxi, and was borne away . . .

In twenty minutes he was with some trepidation and reluctance entering his own home.

"Well," said Mrs. Wilks, looking up from her needlework, "home so soon?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wilks.

"And," inquired Mrs. Wilks, "just what did you get out of the big adventure?"

Mr. Wilks sighed.

"The wrong hat," he told her.

"How silly," she said, glancing at it. "It's not a bit like yours."

"No," he said, "it isn't, is it?"

For the first time Mr. Wilks really inspected the thing. After a moment he got up, took the hat into his den, and sat down and stared hard at it, while little chills began to run up and down his spine.

He saw a cock's feather jauntily caught in the riband. He saw

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two bullet holes in the crown. He explored them with shaking but eager fingers. He vaguely remembered two men still lounging in the darkness beyond a garish splash of light as the taxi drew away.

For a long time Mr. Wilks sat savouring it; then he got up and put the hat away tenderly in a hat box.

When presently he returned to the living-room, Mrs. Wilks, still placidly sewing, said, "I hope you wore that other hat, anyway."

"No," he told her, "as a matter of fact at the last minute I didn't."

"You might have caught your death," Mrs. Wilks rebuked him.

Mr. Wilks allowed himself a faint secretive smile.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I might have." © Leslie Gordon Barnard 1959

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SOLUTIONS to FOR BATH CHAPS on page 34

1. *a. The British Central Criminal Court; b. American flag; c. Manchester cricket ground; d. Novel by Walter Scott.*
2. *a. The Sparrow; b. John Wilkes Booth; c. Ravaillac; d. Clytemnestra; e. Brutus, Cassius, Casca, Decius, Metellus, Trebonius, Cinna, and others; f. Not Professor Moriarty—he died a natural death.*
3. *a. All the troubles in the world, and Hope at the bottom; b. Her prophecies.*
4. *Thirty-six. They were allowed to marry.*
5. *a. To obtrude oneself for bed and board;*
   b. A credulous newsmonger;
   c. The squiggle at the tail of a signature.
6. *Jellyfish.*
7. *a. Alexander the Great's horse; b. Dr. Johnson's cat; c. Queen Victoria's dog.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Mint julep.* 6, *Scrub.* 9, *Hock.* 10, *Tree.* 11, *Abuse.* 12, *Obeyed.* 13, *Time.* 15, *End.* 16, *Upas.* 18, *Brass band.* 22, *Adherents.* 24, *Iris.* 26, *Ely.* 28, *Butt.* 29, *Bishop.* 31, *Again.* 32, *Alto.* 33, *Ibid.* 34, *Extol.* 35, *Cymbeline.*

Down. 2, *Ironbound.* 3, *Tokay.* 4, *Untidy.* 5, *Elector.* 6, *Skate.* 7, *Route.* 8, *Blended.* 14, *Must.* 17, *Ale.* 19, *Bar.* 20, *Nestorian.* 21, *Jehu.* 22, *Acetate.* 23, *Totally.* 25, *Absorb.* 27, *Yeast.* 28, *Banal.* 30, *Still.*

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A Little Night Music

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard . . .

JOHN KEATS

Moon Music

The music is cool and rejoices,
The kettledrum fitfully groans,
But a hundred harmonious voices
Sing out in the overtones.

The cello is rum and romantic,
The basses are glum and unglued,
The oboes go off in an antic
More ruggedly rustic than rude.

The triangle taps out the Pleiads,
The clarinet mimics the moon,
The twittering flutes are the dryads
Pursued by the gurgling bassoon . . .

Emotion has suffered a sea-change.
Cool reason recovers her sway
As I note a most exquisite key-change
From D to the dominant A.

R. P. LISTER, *On Listening to Music With Two Voices*

Two Bars Rest

A member of the Salvation Army rode in uniform with his hands off the handlebars of his racing bicycle and played the opening bars of " Hark the Herald Angels Sing " on a cornet . . . He pleaded Guilty to riding without reasonable consideration.

The Times,
22nd January, 1958

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Chamber Music

My wife and I,
When we're alone,
We play the harp
And saxophone;
But our housekeeper
(Who's no light sleeper)
Began to carp
About the harp,
And made vile cracks
Pertaining to my sax.
So now the house is quiet as death
But on we play with bated breath
And gloat
O'er each gently muffled note—
As we lie beneath the covers
Rocking and rolling like fretful lovers.

NORMAN SMITH, *Nocturne in A Flat*

Banned Concert

The following is the report of a Work Study Engineer after a visit to a symphony concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London:

For considerable periods the four oboe players had nothing to do. The number should be reduced and the work spread more evenly over the whole of the concert, thus eliminating peaks of activity. All the twelve violins were playing identical notes; this seems unnecessary duplication. The staff of this section should be drastically cut. If a larger volume of sound is required, it could be obtained by electronic apparatus.

Much effort was absorbed in the playing of demi-semi-quavers: this seems to be unnecessary refinement. It is recommended that all notes should be rounded up to the nearest semi-quaver. If this were done it would be possible to use trainees and lower-grade operatives more extensively.

No useful purpose is served by repeating on the horns a passage which has already been handled by the strings. It is estimated that if all redundant passages were eliminated the whole concert-time of two hours could be reduced to twenty minutes and there would be no need for an intermission.

Anonymous memorandum
circulating in London

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Further chapters of this enthralling new novel

In narrow Arachova, I came to grief with the hired car—the car for Monsieur Simon of Delphi—urgently required; a matter of life and death, the little man in the Athens cafe had told me as he flung the car key on my table and disappeared. He had taken it for granted that I, Camilla Haven (eager to get to Delphi and short of cash) was "Monsieur Simon's girl." When she did not turn up, I took this ironic dare from the gods of Greece and drove her hired car myself.

The grinning, gesticulating crowd in Arachova fetched a tall Englishman, Simon Lester, to back the car for me, and he—disclaiming all knowledge of Monsieur Simon or Simon's girl—drove me to Delphi.

Simon's brother Michael, a British Liaison Officer, had been killed somewhere on Parnassus in 1944. And now Simon and I were on our way to Stephanos, the old shepherd who had sheltered Michael.

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My Brother Michael

By MARY STEWART

STEPHANOS' house in Arachova was a small two-storied building set at the top of a stairway. Its bottom storey opened straight on the alley, and housed the beasts—a donkey and two goats and a gaggle of skinny hens—while stone stairs led up the outer wall of the house to the top storey where the family lived.

At the head of the steps a wide concrete platform served as porch and garden in one. Its low parapet was crowded with pots full of greenery, and roofed with a trellis of rough branches which formed a pergola for the vine.

I saw Simon stoop to avoid a loaded bough, and a hanging bunch of grapes brushed my cheek with a cold gentle touch. The top half of the door was open, and the light streamed out to gild the vine-tendrils. There was a hot oily smell from the family's supper, mixed with goat, and donkey, and the furry musk-smell of geraniums where I had brushed a hand against one of the flowerpots.

We had been heard coming up the steps. As we crossed the platform the lower half of the door opened, and an old man stood there, large against the weak light from within.

I paused. Simon was behind me, still in shadow. I moved aside to let him pass me, and he came forward, hand outstretched, with some greeting in Greek. I saw the old man stiffen as he peered out. His mouth opened as if to make some involuntary exclamation, then he seemed to draw back a little. He said formally, "Brother of Michael, you are welcome. The woman of the house said you would come tonight."

Simon withdrew the hand which the old man hadn't appeared to notice, and said with equal formality, "My name is Simon

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Lester. I'm glad to meet you, Kyrie Stephanos. This is Kyria Camilla Haven, a friend who has brought me down in her car."

The old man inclined his head, saying slowly, "You are both welcome. Be pleased to come in."

He turned then and went into the room.

The subsequent conversation was in Greek, and therefore I didn't understand it. Afterwards Simon gave me as exact a translation as he could of all that was said, and at the time I was able to follow what I may perhaps call the emotional movements of the conversation.

Our welcome wasn't exactly a glowing one, and this surprised me. I had seen, during my stay in Greece, so much of the miracle of Greek hospitality that I was both disconcerted and repelled. It didn't worry me that Stephanos hadn't spoken to me—I was only a woman, after all, and as such had pretty low social rating—but his rejection of Simon's outstretched hand had been quite deliberate, and his gesture now, as he invited us to follow him in, was heavy and, it seemed, reluctant.

I hesitated, glancing at Simon doubtfully.

He didn't appear to be in the least put out. He merely lifted an eyebrow at me, and waited for me to precede him into the house.

The single living- and sleeping-room of the house was high and square. The floor was of scrubbed boards, the walls whitewashed and hung with vivid holy pictures in appalling colours. Light came from a single naked electric bulb.

In one corner stood an old-fashioned oil-stove, and above it shelves for pans and a blue curtain that no doubt concealed food and crockery. Against one wall was an immense bed, covered now with a brown blanket and obviously used during the day as a sofa. Above the bed hung a small icon of the Virgin and Child, with a red electric bulb glowing in front of it.

A Victorian-looking cupboard, a scrubbed table, a couple of kitchen chairs, and a bench covered with cheap American-cloth made up the rest of the furniture. A note of colour was supplied by the one rug on the boarded floor. It was locally woven, in brilliant scarlet and parrot-green. The room had the air of great poverty and an almost fierce cleanliness.

There was an old woman sitting over near the stove on one of the hard chairs. I took her to be Stephanos' wife—the woman of the house. She was dressed in black, and even in the house wore the Moslem-looking headscarf that veils mouth and chin and gives the field-workers of Greece such an Eastern look. It was pulled down now below her chin, and I could see her face. She looked very old, as peasant women of hot countries do. Her face had lovely bones, fine and regular, but the skin had dried into a thousand wrinkles, and her teeth had decayed.

She smiled at me and made a gesture of shy welcome, to which I responded with a sort of bow and an embarrassed, "Good evening," in Greek, as I took the chair she indicated. She made no further

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move to greet us, and I noticed that her look in reply to Simon's greeting was uneasy, almost scared. Her gnarled hands moved in her lap, and then she dropped her eyes to them and kept them there.

Simon had taken the other chair near the door, and the old man sat down on the bench. I found myself staring at him. So much a part of the land of myth was he that he might have come straight out of Homer. His face was brown, wrinkled like the woman's, and in expression patriarchal and benevolent. The white hair and beard were curled like those of the great Zeus in the Athens Museum.

He was dressed in a sort of long tunic of faded blue, buttoned close down the front and reaching to his thighs; beneath it he wore what looked like white cotton jodhpurs bound at the knee with black bands. On his head was a small soft black cap. The knotted, powerful hands seemed as if they were uneasy without a crook to grasp.

He looked at Simon under thick white brows. The look was grave and, I thought, measuring. In the corner beside me, the old woman sat silent. I could hear the animals moving about below us, and the quick tread of someone coming up the alley from the street.

Stephanos had just opened his mouth to speak when there was an interruption. The quick steps outside mounted the stone stairs at a run. A youth came across the balcony with a rush and paused in the doorway, one hand on the jamb of the door, the other thrust into his waistband. It was a very dramatic pose, and he was a very dramatic young man. He was about eighteen, lean and brown and beautiful, with thick black curls and a vivid, excited face. He wore ancient striped flannels, and the loudest and most awful teddy-boy shirt I have ever seen.

He said, "Grandfather! He's come?"

Then he saw Simon. He didn't appear to notice me at all, but I was getting used to that, and merely sat quiet like the woman of the house. The boy flashed a delighted smile at Simon, and a flood of rapid Greek which was interrupted by his grandfather's saying repressively, "Who told you to come, Niko?"

Niko whirled back to him. All his movements were swift like those of a graceful but restless young cat. "They told me at Lefteris' that he had come again. I wanted to see him."

"And now you see him. Sit down and be silent, Niko. We have much to say."

I saw Niko throw a quick appraising glance at Simon. "Have you told him?"

"I have told him nothing. Sit down and be silent."

Niko turned to obey, but his look lingered on Simon. The dark eyes glinted with something that could have been excitement mixed with amusement—or even malice.

Simon met it with that masked, indifferent look that I was beginning to know. He had taken out his cigarette case, and now he glanced at me. I shook my head. "Niko?"

The boy put out a hand, then stopped, drew it back, and sent

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Simon another of his vivid smiles. "No, thank you, kyrie." A glance at his grandfather, then he crossed to the big bed and threw himself on it.

Simon lit a cigarette, put the match carefully and tidily back in the box, put the box in his pocket, and then turned to Stephanos again.

The latter was sitting motionless. He still didn't speak. The silence came back, heavy, charged—and the boy stirred restlessly on the bed. His eyes never left Simon's face. Beside me the woman hadn't moved, but as I glanced at her I saw her eyes slide sideways to meet mine, only to drop swiftly to the hands in her lap as if in an ecstasy of shyness. I realised then that she had been covertly studying my dress, and the knowledge came to me suddenly, warmingly, that Stephanos, too, was shy.

Perhaps Simon had divined this, for he didn't wait for Stephanos, but spoke easily, bridging the moment.

"Kyrie Stephanos, I'm very glad to meet you at last, and the woman of your house. My father and I wrote to you to thank you for what you did for my brother Michael, but letters can't say it all. My father is dead now, but I'm speaking for him, too, when I say thank you again. You'll understand it isn't always possible to put into words all that one feels—all one would like to say, but I think you will understand what I feel, and what my father felt."

He turned his head to smile at the woman.

She didn't smile back. I thought she made a little sound as if of pain, and she moved in her chair. Her narrow lips worked in and out, and her fingers gripped each other painfully.

Stephanos said, almost roughly, "There is nothing for you to say, kyrie. We did no more than we should."

"It was a very great deal," said Simon gently. "You couldn't have done more if he, too, had been your son." A quick glance at the old woman. "I shan't say much about that, kyria, because there are memories that you won't want to revive; and I shall try not to ask any questions that might distress you. But I had to come and thank you, from my father and for myself—and to see the house where my brother Michael found friends in the last days of his life."

He paused, and looked round him slowly. There was silence again. Below us the animals shuffled, and one of them sneezed. There was nothing in Simon's face to read, but I saw the boy's glinting glance on him again before it turned as if in impatience to his grandfather. But Stephanos said nothing.

At length Simon spoke. "So it was here."

"It was here, kyrie. Below, behind the manger, there is a gap in the wall. He hid there. The dirty Germans did not think to look behind the sacks of straw and the dung. Would you like me to show you?"

Simon shook his head. "No. I told you I don't want to remind you of that day. And I don't think I need ask you anything much about it, as you told us most of it in the letter that the papa wrote

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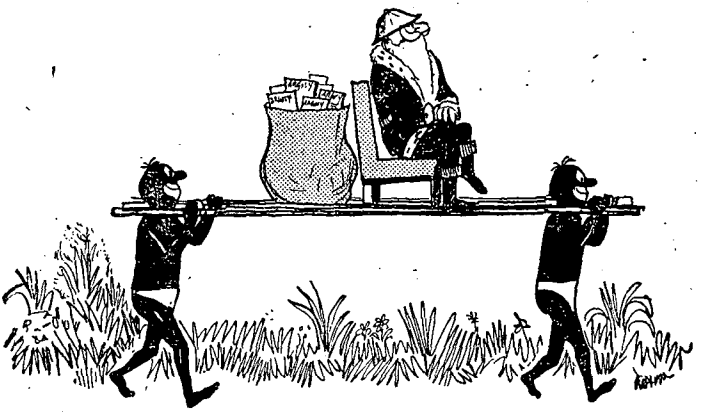

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for you. You told me how Michael had been wounded in the shoulder and had come here for shelter, and how, after—later on, he went back into the mountains."

"It was just before dawn," said the old man, "on the second of October. We begged him to stay with us, because he was not yet well, and the wet weather comes early in the mountains. But he would not. He helped us to bury my son Nikolaos, whom the Germans shot because—because they could not find Michael. Then he went." He nodded towards the intent youth on the bed. "There was that one, you understand, and his sister, Maria, who is since married to Georgios who has a shop in the village. When the Germans came the children were out in the fields with their mother, or who knows? They, too, might have been killed. Kyrie Michael—" he pronounced it as a trisyllable, Mi-ha-eel—"would not stay, because of them. He went up into the mountain."

"Yes. A few days later he was killed. You found his body somewhere over between here and Delphi, and you took it down to be buried."

"That is so. What I found on his body was taken after three weeks to an Englishman who was going by night from Galaxidion. But this you know."

"I want you to show me where he was killed, Stephanos."

There was a short silence. The boy, Niko, watched Simon steadily. I noticed that he had taken out a cigarette of his own and was smoking it.

The old man said heavily, "I will do that, of course. Tomorrow?"

"If it's convenient."

"For you, it is convenient."

"You're very good."

"You are the brother of Michael."

Simon said gently, "He was here a long time, wasn't he?"

Beside me the woman moved suddenly and said in a clear soft voice, "He was my son." I saw with a wrench of discomfort that there were tears on her cheeks. "He should have stayed," she said, and then repeated it almost desperately, "he should have stayed."

Simon said, "But he had to go. How could he stay and put you and your family in that danger again? When the Germans came back—"

"They didn't come back." It was Niko who spoke, clearly, from the bed.

"No." Simon turned his head. "Because they caught Michael in the mountains. But if they hadn't caught him—if he had still been hiding here—they might have come back to the village, and then—"

"They did not catch him," said the old man.

Simon turned back sharply. Stephanos was sitting still on the bench, knees apart, hands clasped between them, his heavy body bent slightly forward. His eyes looked fathoms dark under the white brows. The two men stared at one another. I found myself

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stirring on my hard chair. It was as if the scene was taking place in slow motion, silent and incomprehensible, yet powered with emotions that plucked uncomfortably at the nerves.

Simon said slowly, "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Only," said Stephanos, "that Michael was not killed by the Germans. He was killed by a Greek."

"By a Greek?" Simon echoed it almost blankly.

The old man made a gesture that to me, still not understanding anything except that the men's talk had an overtone of tragedy, conveyed a curiously powerful impression of resignation and shame.

"By a man from Arachova," he said.

It was at this moment that the light chose to go out.

The Greeks were obviously accustomed to the whims of the electric system. With scarcely a moment's delay the old woman had found and lit an oil lamp, and placed it on the table in the middle of the room. It was a frightful-looking lamp of some cheap, bright metal, but it burnt with a soft apricot light and the sweet smell of olive oil. Niko had rolled over on his stomach and was watching the two other men bright-eyed.

Simon was saying, "I—see. That makes a lot of things a lot plainer. And, of course, you don't know who it was."

"Indeed we do."

Simon's brows shot up. The old man smiled sourly.

"You are wondering why we have not killed him, kyrie, when we called Michael our son?"

From the bed Niko said in a smooth voice that was certainly malicious, "That is not the way the English work, Grandfather."

Simon flicked him a look, but said mildly to Stephanos, "I was wondering what had happened to him. I gather he's alive."

"I'll explain. I should tell you first of all that the man's name was Dragoumis. Angelos Dragoumis."

"Angelos?"

The old man nodded. "Yes. You know of him, of course. I told you in the letter the papa wrote for me that Michael had worked with him. But I should never have told you this of Angelos if you had not come. Now that you are here, these things cannot be hidden. It is your right to know."

Simon was carefully extinguishing his cigarette on the lid of a matchbox. His face was still and shuttered, his eyes hidden. I saw the boy Niko roll over again on the bed and grin to himself.

"You know that Angelos was the leader of the ELAS troop that Michael was working with," said Stephanos. "When Michael left here he went up, I think, with the intention of rejoining them. They had scattered when the big German search operation started in the hills, and most of them had moved north, Angelos with them. What brought Angelos back in this direction I don't know, but it is certain that he fetched up against Michael over on Parnassus and murdered him there."

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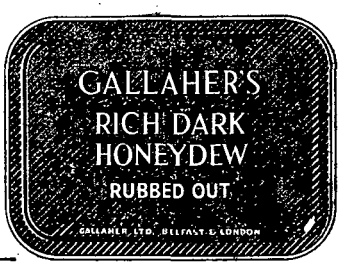

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"Why?"

"I do not know. Except that such murders were not rare in those days. It may be that Michael and Angelos had had some quarrel over the action of Angelos' troops. Perhaps Michael was putting too much pressure on him. We know now that Angelos was anxious to save his men and his supplies for a different battle later—after the Germans had gone."

I saw Simon look up sharply, those light grey eyes vividly intent. "Angelos was one of them? Are you sure?"

"Certain. He played for high stakes, did Angelos Dragoumis. He was in Athens soon after the Germans had left Greece, and we knew he was active in the massacre at Kalamai. Oh yes, you may be sure that he was betraying the Allies all the time."

He smiled thinly. "I do not think that Michael can have known. No, this was some other quarrel. It may simply have been that two such men could never come together and agree. Angelos was bad, bad from the heart, and Michael—he did not like having to work with such a one. They had quarrelled before. He told me so. Angelos was an arrogant man and a bully, and Michael—well, Michael could not be driven either."

"True enough." Simon was selecting another cigarette. "But you said he was murdered. If two men quarrel and there's a fight, that isn't murder, Stephanos."

"It was murder. It was a fight, but not a fair one. Michael had been wounded, remember."

"Even so—"

"He was struck from behind first, with a stone or with the butt of a gun. There was a great mark there, and the skin was broken. It is a miracle that the blow didn't kill him, or stun him at least. But he must have heard Angelos near him, and turned, because in spite of the traitor's blow from behind, and Michael's wounded shoulder, there was a fight. Michael was—a good deal marked."

"I see." Simon was lighting his cigarette. "How did Angelos kill him? I take it he wasn't using a gun. A knife?"

"His neck was broken."

The match paused, an inch from Simon's cigarette. The grey eyes lifted to the old man's. I couldn't see their expression from where I sat, but I saw Stephanos nod once. Niko's eyes narrowed suddenly, and glinted between their long lashes. The match made contact. "It must have been quite a struggle," Simon said.

"He wouldn't be easy to kill," said the old man. "But with the wounded shoulder, and the blow on the head . . ."

His voice trailed off. He wasn't looking at Simon now; he seemed to be seeing something beyond the lamplit walls of the room, something remote in place and time.

There was a pause. Then Simon blew out a long cloud of tobacco smoke. "Yes," he said. "Well. And the man Angelos—what happened to him?"

"That I can't tell you. He has not been back to Arachova, naturally. It was said that he went with many of his kind into

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Yugoslavia when their bid for power failed. In fourteen years nobody has heard of him, and it is probable that he is dead. He had only one relative, a cousin, Dimitrios Dragoumis, who has had no news of him."

"A cousin? Here?"

"Dragoumis lives now at Itea. He also fought in Angelos' troop, but he was not a leader, and—well, some things are best forgotten." The old man's voice roughened. "But the things that Angelos did to his own people, these are not forgotten. He was at Kalamai: it is said he was also at Pyrgos, where many hundred Greeks died, and among them my own cousin, Panos, an old man." The gnarled hands moved convulsively on his knees. "No matter of that—

"But I do not speak merely of his politics, Kyrie Simon, or even of what such as he do in war. He was evil, kyrie; he was a man who delighted in evil. He liked the sight of pain. He liked best to hurt children and old women, and he boasted like Ares of how many he himself had killed. He would put a man's eyes out—or a woman's—and smile while he did it. Always that smile. He was an evil man, and he betrayed Michael and murdered him."

"And if he has not been seen since my brother died, how can you be sure he murdered him?"

"I saw him," said the old man simply.

"*You saw him?*"

"Yes. It was he beyond doubt. When I came on them he turned and ran. But I couldn't follow him." He paused again, one of those heavy, terrible little pauses. "You see, Michael was still alive."

I saw Simon's eyes jerk up again to meet his. The old man nodded. "Yes. He lived only a few moments. But it was enough to hold me there beside him and let Angelos get away."

"Angelos made no attempt to attack you?"

"None. He, too, had been badly mauled." There was satisfaction in the old shepherd's eyes. "Michael died hard, even with that traitor's bash on the back of the head. Angelos might have shot at me, but later I found his revolver lying under a boulder, as if it had been flung there in the struggle. The countryside was full of Germans, you see, and he must have counted on killing Michael quietly after he'd stunned him, but he wasn't quick or clever enough, and Michael managed to turn on him.

"When I came to the head of the cliff and saw them below me, Angelos was just getting to his feet. He turned to look for his gun then, but my dog attacked him, and it was all he could do to get clear away. Without his gun, he could have done nothing." He wiped his mouth with the back of a knotted brown hand. "I took Michael down to Delphi; it was nearest. That's all."

"He didn't speak?"

Stephanos hesitated, and Simon's glance sharpened. Stephanos shook his head. "It was nothing, kyrie. If there had been anything I would have put it in the letter."

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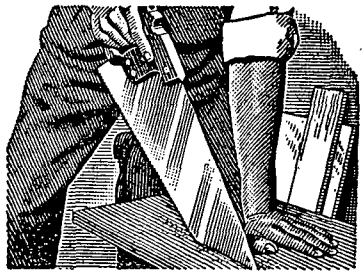

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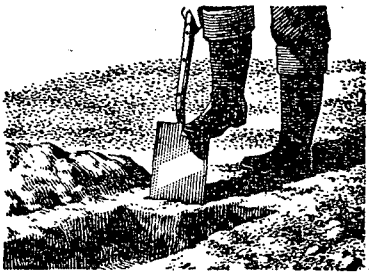

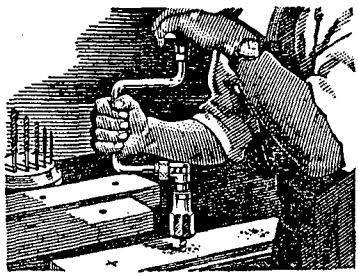

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"But he did speak?"

"Two words. He said, 'The Charioteer.'"

The words were "o eniochos," and they were classical, not modern, Greek. They were familiar to me, as to many visitors to Delphi, because they refer to the famous bronze statue that stands in the Delphi Museum. It is the statue of a youth, the Charioteer, in a stiffly pleated robe, still holding in his hands the reins of his vanished horses. I glanced at Simon, wondering where, in an exchange bristling with the names Angelos and Michael, the Charioteer could have a place.

Simon was looking as puzzled as I. "The Charioteer? Are you sure?"

"I am not quite sure. I had run hard down the path to the foot of the cliff, and I was out of breath and much distressed. He lived only a matter of seconds after I got to him. But he knew me, and I thought that was what he said. It is an ancient word, but of course it is familiar because it is used of the statue in the Delphi Museum. But why Michael should have tried to tell me about that, I do not know. If indeed that was what he whispered." He straightened his back a little. "I repeat, I would have told you if I had been sure, or if it had meant anything."

"Why did you not tell us about Angelos?"

"It was over then, and he had gone, and it was better to let Michael's father think he had died in battle and not at the hand of a traitor. Besides," said Stephanos simply, "we were ashamed."

"It was so much over," said Simon, "that when Michael's brother comes to Arachova to find out just how his brother died, the men in Arachova avoid him, and his host won't shake his hand."

The old man smiled. "Very well, then. It is not over. The shame remains."

"The shame isn't yours."

"It is that of Greece."

The old woman got to her feet, pulled back the blue curtain, and brought out a big stone jar. She put glasses on the table and began to pour out the dark sweet wine. Stephanos said, "You will drink with us, then?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," said Simon. The old woman handed him a glass, then Stephanos, Niko, and finally me. She didn't take one herself, but remained standing, watching me with a sort of shy pleasure. I sipped the wine. It was as dark as mavrodaphne and tasted of cherries.

I smiled at her over the glass and said tentatively, in Greek, "It's very good."

Her face split into a wide smile. She bobbed her head and repeated delightedly, "Very good, very good."

Niko turned over on the bed and said in American-accented English, "You speak Greek, miss?"

"No. Only a few words."

Niko turned to Simon. "How come you speak good Greek, eh?"

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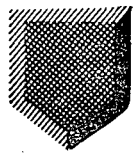

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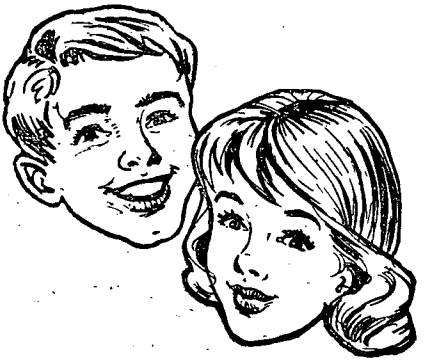

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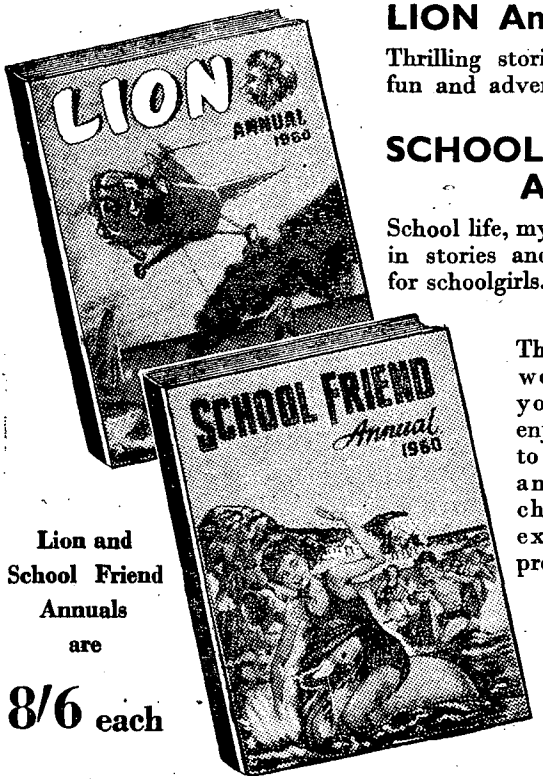

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" My brother, Michael, taught me when I was younger than you. I knew I would come here one day."

" Why you not come before? "

" It costs too much, Niko."

" I see." The dark eyes widened in a limpid look. " And now you have come. You know about Angelos and your brother. What would you say if I told you something else, kyrie? "

" What? "

" That Angelos is still alive? "

Simon said slowly. " Are you telling me that, Niko? "

" He has been seen near Delphi, on the mountain."

" Recently? " said Simon sharply.

" Oh yes." Niko flashed that beautiful, malicious smile up at him. " But perhaps it is only a ghost. There are ghosts on Parnassus, kyrie: lights that move and voices that carry across the rocks. There are those who see these things. Myself, no. It is the old gods, not? "

" Possibly," said Simon. " Is this the truth, Niko? That Angelos was seen? "

Niko shrugged. " How can I tell? It was Janis who saw him, and Janis is— " he made a significant gesture towards his forehead. " Angelos killed Janis' mother when the Andartes burnt his father's farm, and ever since then Janis has been queer in the head, and has ' seen ' Angelos—oh, many times. If ghosts are true, then he still walks on Parnassus.

" But Dimitrios Dragoumis—that is true enough. He has asked many questions about your coming. All the men here in Arachova know that you are coming, and they talk about it and wonder—but Dragoumis, he has been to Delphi and to Arachova and has asked questions—oh, many questions."

" What is he like? "

" He is a little like his cousin. Not in the face, but in the—what do you say?—the build. But not in the spirit, either." His look was innocent. " It may be that you will meet Dragoumis. But do not be afraid of him. And do not worry yourself about Angelos, Kyrie Simon."

Simon grinned. " Do I look as if I am worrying? "

" No," said Niko frankly, " but then, he is dead."

" And if Janis is right, and he is not dead? "

" I think," said Niko almost insolently, " that you are only an Englishman, Kyrie Simon. Not? "

" So what? "

Niko gave a charming little crack of laughter and rolled over on the bed. Stephanos said suddenly and angrily, in Greek, " Niko, behave yourself. What does he say, Kyrie Simon? "

" He thinks I couldn't deal with Angelos," said Simon idly. " Here, Niko, catch." He threw the boy a cigarette. Niko fielded it with a graceful, clawed gesture. He was still laughing. Simon turned to Stephanos, " Do you think it's true that Angelos has been seen hereabouts? "

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The old shepherd slanted a fierce look at his grandson under his white brows. "So he has told you that tale, has he? Some rumour started by an idiot who has seen Angelos at least a dozen times since the end of the war. Aye, and Germans, too, a score of times. Don't pay any attention to *that* moonshine."

Simon laughed. "Or to the lights and voices on Parnassus?"

Stephanos said, "If a man goes up into Parnassus after sunset, why should he not see strange things? The gods still walk there, and a man who would not go carefully in the country of the gods is a fool." Another of those glowering looks at his grandson. "You, Niko, have learnt a lot of folly in Athens. And that is a terrible shirt."

Niko sat up straight. "It is not!" he protested, stung. "It is American!"

Stephanos snorted, and Simon grinned. "Aid to Greece?"

The old man gave a gruff bark of laughter. "He is not a bad boy, kyrie, even if Athens has spoilt him. But now he comes home to work, and I will make a man of him. Give Kyrie Simon some more wine." This to his wife, who hurried to refill Simon's glass.

"Thank you." Simon added, in a different tone, "Is it true that this man Dragoumis has been asking questions about me?"

"After it was known that you were coming, he asked many questions—when you came, for how long, what you meant to do, and all that." He smiled sourly. "I don't speak much to that one, me."

"But why should he be interested? Do you suppose he had anything to do with Michael's death?"

"He had nothing to do with it. That much we found out after the war, before he came back here. Otherwise he would not," said Stephanos simply, "have dared come back. Once before, a year—more—eighteen months ago, he spoke to me and asked me what had happened, and where it was that Michael was killed. He showed a decent shame, and he spoke well of Michael; but I do not talk of my sons to every man. I refused to speak of it. And no one else knew the whole truth, except the priest at Delphi who is since dead, and my own brother Alkis who was killed in the war."

"And now me."

"And now you. I will take you there tomorrow and show you the place. It is your right."

He looked up under the white brows at Simon for another considering moment. Then he said slowly, irrelevantly, "I think Kyrie Simon, that you are very like Michael. And Niko—Niko is even more of a fool than I had thought."

Simon didn't speak on the way back.

As we neared Delphi, trees crowded in above the road blocking out the starlight, and Simon slowed the car, drove into a wide bay, and stopped. He switched off the engine. Immediately the sound

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of running water filled the air. He turned out the lights, and the dark trees crowded closer. I could smell the pines, cool and pungent. They loomed thick in the starlight, rank on rank of scented stone-pines crowding up towards the cleft where the water sprang.

Beyond the trees reared the immense darkness of rock, the Shining Ones, no longer shining but pinnacles and towers of imminent blackness.

We sat there in the car and smoked while he told me fully what had passed in the shepherd's cottage. So vivid were my own visual impressions of the recent scene that I was able without difficulty to impose my picture, so to speak, over his, and see where movement and gesture had fitted in with the words.

When he had finished I didn't speak, for the sufficient reason that I could find nothing to say. Who was I to offer comfort or even comment on a brother's murder? The murder might be fourteen years old, but there's a kind of shock in the very word, let alone the knowledge of the deed, however many years lie between it and the discovery.

Simon himself made no comment. He threw his finished cigarette over the side of the car into the dust, and said, with a complete change of tone and subject, "Shall we walk up through the ruins? You haven't seen them yet, and starlight's not a bad start. Unless of course you'd rather wait and see them for the first time alone?"

"No. I'd like to go."

We went up the steep path through the pines. Now that my eyes were used to the darkness it was just possible to see the way. We crossed the narrow rush of water and were on a track soft with pine-needles.

After a while we came out from under the trees into an open space where fallen blocks made treacherous walking, and dimly in the starlight I could see the shape of ruined walls.

"The Roman market-place," said Simon. "Those were shops over there. By Delphi's standards this is modern stuff, so we bypass it quickly. Here we are. This is the gate of the temple precinct. The steps are steep, but there's a wide smooth way up through the buildings to the temple itself. Can you see?"

"Fairly well. It's rather stupendous by starlight, isn't it?"

Dimly I could make out the paved road that zigzagged up between the ruined walls of treasuries and shrines. The precinct seemed in this light enormous. Everywhere ahead of us, along the hillside, below among the pines that edged the road, above as far as the eye could reach in the starlight, loomed the broken walls, the spectral pillars, the steps and pedestals and altars of the ancient sanctuary.

We walked slowly up the Sacred Way. I could make out the little Doric building that once housed the Athenian treasure, the grim stone where the Sybil sat to foretell the Trojan War, the slender pillars of the Portico of the Athenians, the shape of a

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great altar. Then we had reached the temple itself, a naked and broken floor, half up the mountainside, held there in space by its massive retaining-walls, and bordered with the six great columns that even in the darkness stood emphatic against the star-crowded sky.

I took a little breath.

Beside me, Simon quoted softly, " The gods still walk there, and a man who would not go carefully in the country of the gods is a fool."

" They *are* still here," I said. " Is it silly of me? But they are."

" Three thousand years," he said. " Wars, treachery, earthquake, slavery, oblivion. And men still recognise them here. No, it's not silly of you. It happens to everyone with intelligence and imagination. This is Delphi—and, well, we're not the first to hear the chariot wheels.

" I suppose," he said, " that if a place was, like Delphi, a centre of worship for—how many?—about two thousand years, something remains. Something inheres in stone, I'll swear, and here it's in the very air. The effect's helped by the landscape: I suppose it must be one of the most magnificent in the world. Come up into the temple."

A ramp led up to the temple floor, which was paved with great stone blocks, some broken and dangerous. We picked our way carefully across this until we stood at the edge of the floor between the columns. Below us was the sheer drop of the retaining-wall; below that the steep mountainside and the ghosts of the scattered shrines. The far valley was an immensity of darkness, filled with the small movements of the night wind, and the sound of pine and olive.

Simon's cigarette beside me glowed and faded. I saw that he had turned his back on the spaces of the starlit valley. He was leaning against a column, gazing up the hill behind the temple. I could see nothing there but the thick shadows of trees, and against them more pale shapes of stone.

" What's up there? "

" That's where they found the Charioteer."

The word brought me back to the present with the tingle of a small electric shock. I had forgotten, in the overpowering discovery of Delphi, that Simon would have other preoccupations.

I hesitated: it was he, after all, who had sheered away from the story on to the neutral ground of Delphi. I said a little awkwardly, " Do you suppose Stephanos was right? Does it make any kind of sense to you? "

" None at all," he said cheerfully. His shoulder came away from the pillar. " Why don't you come up to the studio now, and meet Nigel, and have some coffee or a drink? "

" I'd like to, of course, but isn't it awfully late? "

" Not for this country. Are you tired? "

" I keep feeling I ought to be, but I'm not."

He laughed. " It's the air, or the light, or the simple intoxication

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of being alive in Hellas. It lasts, too. Then you will come?"

"I should love to."

As I picked my way across the temple floor with his hand under my arm I had time to feel surprise at myself, and a sort of resignation.

I said, "Aren't we going down to the road? Why this way?"

"We don't need to go down. The studio's away up above the temple, just over the mountain's shoulder towards Delphi. It's easier to go up through the rest of the shrine."

"But the car?"

"I'll get it later when I've seen you down to your hotel. It's no distance from there by the road. This way . . . These steps lead up towards the little theatre. That thing on the right was put up by Alexander the Great after a narrow escape in a lion-hunt. Here's the theatre. It's tiny compared with Athens or Epidaurus, but isn't it a gem?"

In the starlight the broken floor looked smooth. The semi-circular tiers of seats rose, seemingly new and unbroken, towards their back-drop of holly-oak and cypress; it lay, a little broken marble cup of a theatre, silent except for the tiny scuffling of a dry twig that the breeze was patting idly along the empty flags.

Simon was feeling in his pockets. "Half a minute; I'll have to find my lighter."

As he pulled it out, I heard the small musical chink of metal on stone. I stooped quickly after the sound. "Something fell; some money, I think. Here—not far away, anyway. Shine the light down, will you?"

The lighter flicked into flame, and he bent with it near the ground. Almost immediately I saw the sharp gleam of a coin. I picked it up and held it towards him. The orange-coloured flame slid alive and sparkling across the little disc in my palm I said, "That's surely—*gold?*"

"Yes. Thank you." He took it and dropped it into his pocket. He might have been discussing a lost halfpenny, or at most a threepenny stamp. "That was one of the souvenirs that Stephanos sent us. I told you he sent what was on Michael's body when he died. There were three of these gold sovereigns.

"I had had an idea what it was that Michael might have found. I thought that, as soon as I read his letters and remembered the sovereigns he was carrying. And after what Stephanos told us I'm sure. The gold was what he found—what he was killed for. Angelos' little hoard of British gold, stashed away against the day of the Red dawn."

"Yes, but Simon—" I began, then stopped. He knew Michael better than I did, after all.

The sovereigns clinked together in his pocket. He turned away towards the side of the amphitheatre.

"This is the way up to the path. I'd better go first, perhaps; the steps are badly broken in places."

He reached a hand back to me, and together we mounted the

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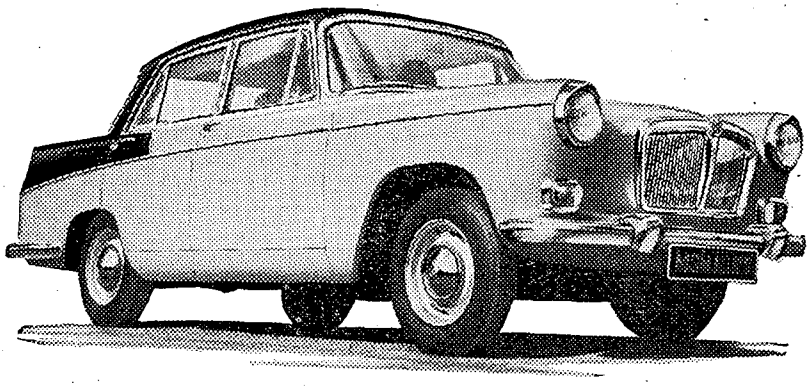

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steep flight. At the top he paused. I heard the rustle of leaves. Then he turned and put something round and polished and cool into my hand. "There you are. It's a pomegranate. There's a little tree growing behind the topmost seats, and I've been longing for an excuse to pick one. Eat it soon, Persephone; then you'll have to stay in Delphi."

The path led us out at last above the trees. It was wide enough now to walk side by side. Simon went on, speaking softly, "I think I'm right, Camilla; I think that's what Michael found. I'd suspected it before, but now I know he was murdered by Angelos I'd bet on it for a certainty."

"But Stephanos said he was killed in a quarrel. Angelos and he—"

"If Michael had been quarrelling with a type like that he wouldn't be very likely to turn his back on him," said Simon. "I'm surprised Stephanos didn't think that one out for himself.

"Take all the bits of the picture and put them together, and what d'you get? I told you that we—the British—were flying in arms and gold during the Occupation, for the use of the Andartes. Angelos, as we now learn from Stephanos, was working for the Communist putsch at the end of the German Occupation of Greece, therefore we can assume that he had an interest in holding back arms and supplies for later use. That's an assumption; but what facts have we? Angelos, when his men scatter northwards to avoid the Germans, comes south—alone. He meets Michael and kills him. He is interrupted before he can search the body, and on Michael are found gold sovereigns, and a hastily-scribbled letter indicating that he has found something."

"Yes," I said, "but—"

"If Angelos had such a cache of guns and gold, and Michael, the B.L.O., had found it, would it not be the complete motive for Michael's murder? I can't help thinking," said Simon softly, "that Angelos saw something that told him Michael had found the cache. It's probably in some cave or other—Parnassus is honeycombed with them; and supposing that Michael, after he left Stephanos' house, had taken shelter in the one where the stuff was hidden? He'd stay there a few days till the Germans left the area, and then Angelos, doubling back to his treasure-chest, would see the British officer coming out of the cave, his cave. It could be, you know. And if Michael didn't see Angelos, as seems obvious, the Greek waited and took his chance and tried to wipe him off then and there. Which means—"

"Which means that, if you're right, the cache was very near the place where Michael was murdered," I said. "And Angelos would come back to take it. If not immediately, then later."

"If he lived to come back. Three months after Mick's death he was out of the country for good."

I said, as casually as I could, "And what if Niko was possibly—just possibly—right? If he *were* still alive? Now, I mean?"

Simon laughed. "It's in the lap of the gods, isn't it?" One

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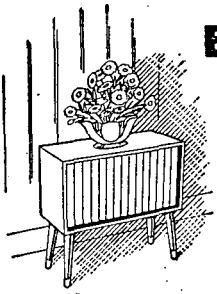

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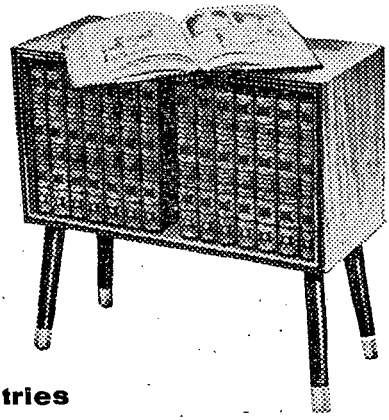

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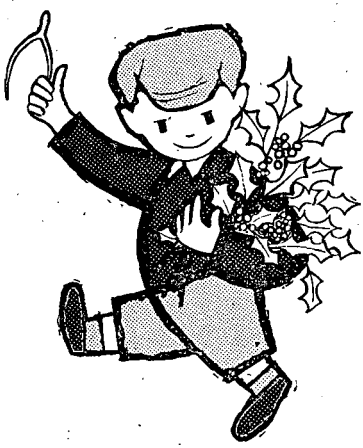

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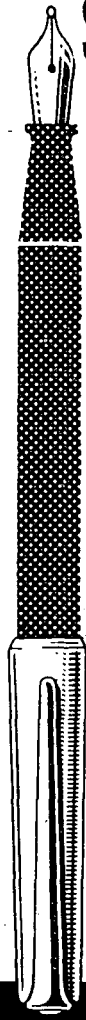

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of the coins spun in his hand as he tossed and caught it. "What do you say? Shall we offer gold to Apollo if he'll bring Angelos back to Delphi now?"

"Aegisthus to Orestes' knife?" I tried to speak equally lightly, but in spite of myself the words sounded harsh and hollow.

"Why not?" The coin dropped into his hand again and his fingers closed on it. He was a shadow in the starlight, watching me.

"Damn it all, Mick was murdered, in a filthy way, and—if I'm right—for the filthiest of motives. And the murderer got away with it, and possibly with a fortune into the bargain. I've no particular desire to find the fortune, but I want to *know*, Camilla. That's all."

"Yes, I see."

"I came here to talk to Stephanos, to see Michael's grave, and to leave it at that. But I can't leave it now, not till it's really over and I know why it happened. I don't suppose there'll be anything left to tell me after all this time, but I have to look. And as for Orestes—" I heard the smile in his voice—"I've no particular ambition for revenge, either, but if I did meet the murderer . . . Don't you see that I'd quite like a word with him?" He laughed again. "Or do you share Niko's opinion of my abilities?"

"No. No, of course not. But this man, Angelos—well, he's—" I floundered and stopped.

"Dangerous? So you don't think that—if I do meet him—I ought to have it out with him?"

"An eye for an eye?" I said. "I thought we didn't believe in that any more."

"Don't you believe it! We do. But in England there's a fine, impersonal, and expensive machinery to get your eye for you, and no personal guilt except your signature on a cheque to the Inland Revenue. Here, it's different. Nobody's going to do the dirty work for you. You do it yourself and nobody knows but the vultures. And Apollo.

"And now, if you're to get any sleep at all tonight, what about chasing up that drink? That's the studio up there, where I'm staying." He led the way at a quickened pace over level ground towards the lights of the studio. It was a big rectangular building situated on top of the bluff behind the village of Delphi.

We had hardly got into the echoing corridor when a door a short way along it opened, and a young man came out like a bullet from a gun. He caught at the jamb of the door as he catapulted out and hung on, almost as if he felt the need of the door's support. He said in a high, excited voice, "Oh, Simon, I was just—" Then he saw me and stopped, disconcerted.

There was something about his sudden appearance that was very like Niko's, but there the resemblance ended. The young man—who I supposed was Nigel, the artist—had none of Niko's beauty or promise of strength, and very little of Niko's assurance. Indeed, now he was looking miserably embarrassed.

He was tallish, and thin, and fair. His skin had taken the sun

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badly, and his eyes were a puckered blue. He had a straggling little beard that made him seem young and rather vulnerable, and his hair was bleached to the colour and texture of dry hay. He had a weakly sensual mouth and the strong, ugly hands of the artist.

Simon said, "Hullo, Nigel. This is Camilla Haven, who's staying in Delphi. I've brought her up for a drink, and she wants to see your drawings."

"Delighted," said Nigel, stammering a little. "C-come into my room, then. We'll have a drink there." As he stood aside for me to pass him, slightly more flushed than before, I found myself wondering if he had been drinking alone in his room. There was that queer look about his eyes, a sense that he was clutching at himself in an effort at control.

His room, basically as bare as the rest of the building, was frantically but rather pleasantly untidy. It was as if the artist's personality, far richer than it appeared from the look of him, had spilt over into the monastic-looking little cell. At the foot of the bed a rucksack stood on the floor, its contents bursting out in confusion.

I saw two shirts, as brightly but rather more respectably coloured than Niko's, a tangle of rope, some dirty handkerchiefs which had obviously been pressed into use as paint-rags, three oranges, and a copy of the poems of Dylan Thomas. The towel flung over the edge of the washbasin was as brightly yellow as a dandelion. Nigel's pyjamas, in a huddle on the bed, were striped in wine and turquoise. And everywhere on the cracked, white walls there were sketches, drawing-pinned haphazardly; they were in a variety of styles from the bold to the delicate, from pencil-sketches to water-colours curling up at the edges as they dried.

I had no time to do more than glance, because our host had dived past me and was dragging forward the room's best chair, a canvas affair of grubby orange.

"W-won't you sit down, Miss—er? It's the best there is. It's quite clean really."

I thanked him and sat down. Simon wandered over to the window and hitched himself up on to the wide sill, where he sat, one leg swinging. Nigel, still with that air of disconcerted fussiness, had dived into the shower-cupboard and was rummaging rather wildly among bottles on the floor. He emerged clutching two tumblers and a large bottle of ouzo.

"Do you like this stuff?" he asked me anxiously. "It's all there is."

There was something about Nigel that disarmed me into a deliberate lie. "I love it," I said, and waited resignedly while he poured a generous dollop into one of the tumblers.

"Would you like water with it?"

Ouzo is the Greek absinthe. It is made from aniseed, and tastes fairly mild and, to my mind, incredibly unpleasant. I find it quite undrinkable neat. On the other hand if you add sufficient water to make it swallowable, there is a lot more to swallow.

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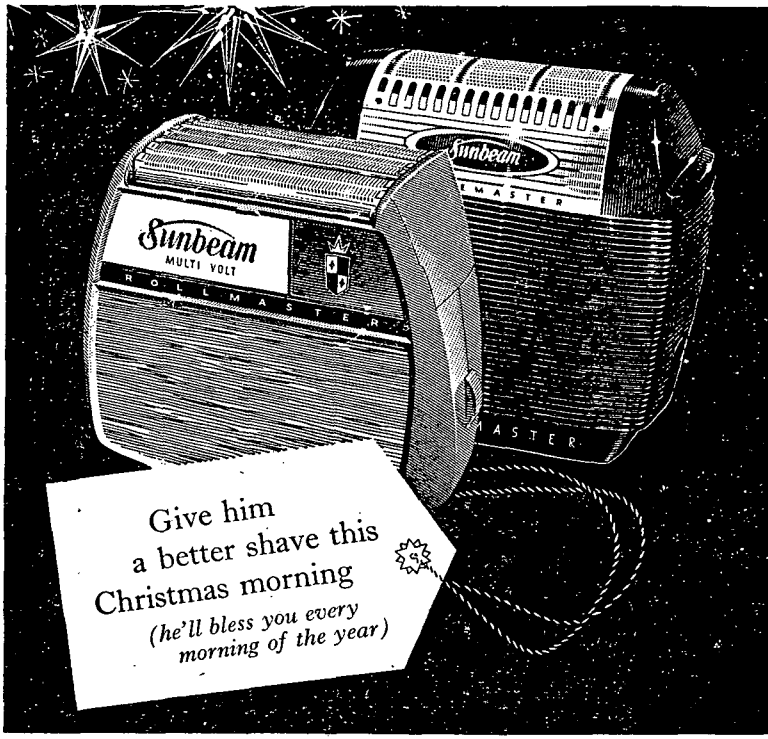

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I said bravely, " Yes, please."

Nigel grabbed a carafe from above the washbasin. Again it struck me sharply that his movements were a parody of Niko's. They were swift and abrupt and angular, but where Niko's had the grace of a striking cat, Nigel's were clumsy and almost unco-ordinated. It was odd for an artist to be clumsy, I thought; then, as I watched Nigel pour water into my glass, I saw that his hand was shaking. That was still odder.

The liquid misted, clouded, and went entirely beastly like quinine. I said, " When. Thanks," and smiled at Nigel, who was watching me with an anxious-puppy expression that made him seem younger than ever. He was, I judged, about twenty-three, but the beard made him look nineteen. I smiled bravely and lifted the glass. " Gia sou, Kyrie Nigel," I said. " I'm sorry, but I don't know your other name."

" Make it Nigel," he said unhelpfully, but with apparent pleasure.

As I drank carefully, I caught Simon's eye, to see that he knew quite well what I felt about ouzo. I scowled at him and took another drink, reflecting yet again that Kyrie Simon Lester saw a damned sight too much. I controlled the shudder that shook me as the liquor went down, and then watched fascinated as Nigel filled Simon's tumbler two-thirds full, grabbed a toothglass for himself and filled that, and then raised it to his lips, said, " Gia sou," quickly, and drank half of it at one fell gulp, neat.

" Cheers," said Simon. " Have you had a good day? "

Nigel, flushing and choking a little over the liquor, managed to say, " Yes. Oh yes, thanks. Very."

" Where did you go? "

The young man waved a vague hand, which almost knocked the ouzo bottle off the table, but unfortunately didn't quite. " Up there."

" You mean up in the precinct? "

" No. Up the hill."

" On to Parnassus again? Did you go over the old track to hunt up some shepherds after all? " He turned to me. " Nigel's got a contract for a series of drawings of Hellenic types—heads of peasants and old women and shepherd boys and so forth. He's done some quite striking ones in a sort of heavy ink line-and-wash."

Nigel said suddenly, " It's exciting. You can't know how exciting. You see a grubby little boy watching the goats, and when you really start to draw him you realise you've seen him a dozen times already in the museums. And I found a girl last week in Amphissa who was pure Minoan, crimped hair and all."

I laughed. " I've met one Zeus and one rather wicked Eros and a dozen assorted satyrs today already."

" Stephanos and Niko? " said Simon.

I nodded. " Nigel ought to meet them. Stephanos," I explained, " is a shepherd from Arachova, and he's straight out of Homer. Niko's his grandson. If it's only the head you want, you

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could hardly do better." I realised, as I spoke, that Simon had apparently told Nigel nothing about Michael or his mission.

Nor did he tell him now. He said, "You may meet them yet. Stephanos is usually some way up between Delphi and Arachova—near that track I took you over yesterday. Is that the way you went again today? How far?"

"Quite a long way." Nigel looked round him vaguely, as if embarrassment had descended on him again. "I got up above the Shining Ones and on to the track and then—well, I just went on walking. It was hot, but up there there was a breeze."

"No work today?" Simon's question was no more than idle, but a flush had crept under Nigel's raw sunburn. It made him look cagey.

"No! I tell you I did hardly anything. I was just walking. Anyway those heads are a bore. They're only bread and butter. You wouldn't like them."

"I'd love to see some of your work, though. Simon's been telling me how awfully good . . ."

He interrupted in a voice so quick and hoarse that it gave the effect of a small outburst of temper. "Simon's talking bilge. They please me, but that's all."

"Some of them are, very good," said Simon quietly, "and *you* know it. If you could—"

"If, if, if," said Nigel rudely. He set his glass down on the table with a sharp click. "You know damn well they're useless."

"But they're what you want to do. They are 'Nigel Barlow,' and what's more, they're uncommon."

"*They're useless.*" The repetition was emphatic. "Anyway, it doesn't matter a damn. Not a damn, do you hear me?"

Simon smiled at him. I think it was then that I first really saw what lay behind that apparently unruffled self-command; what made it so very different from the more flamboyant selfconfidence I had envied. Simon cared. He really did care what happened to this casually-met, troubled, and not very attractive boy.

It was because he cared that he had come back after fourteen years to find out what had happened to Michael. It was not a present tragedy, and he was not, after all, an Orestes seeking revenge. But he cared—for his father's sake, for Stephanos', for the woman's. *Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.* That was it—*involved in mankind*, and, just at this moment, that meant Nigel. *One takes it for granted*, he had said, *that one is there to help*. I suppose one gets to know men quickest by the things they take for granted.

Simon set down his glass, and laced his fingers round one knee. "All right. Well, d'you want us to find you a selling line, Nigel? We must find you a gimmick. Make them come to mock and remain to pay. You must make your pictures out of sequins, or do all your painting under water."

Nigel gave him a reluctant and slightly shamefaced grin.

I said, "There was a Dutch boy in Delphi this evening who'd

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just got in from Jannina. He'd been walking over the hills with a donkey, and painting. I gathered that he'd done a lot of sketching in the villages and more or less paid his way with them."

"Oh, that chap. Yes, I've met him. He's here now."

"Of course, I forgot. Simon told me he'd come up here to sleep tonight. Did you see his work?"

"No. He was too tired to bother. He went to bed at about nine, and I think it'd take a bomb to wake him." His look lingered on me as if he were with difficulty bringing me into focus and himself back into the conversation. He said slowly, "Being true to oneself—knowing that one can do a thing if only the world will give one the chance—but having to fight for it every step of the way . . . means going straight ahead the way you know you have to go, and the devil take the hindmost? Artists—great artists—work that way, don't they? And doesn't the end justify them?" As Simon seemed to hesitate, he whipped round on me. "What do *you* think?"

I thought, There *is* something going on here that I don't understand. And I don't believe Simon understands it either, and it worries him.

Simon said slowly, those cool eyes vividly alive now, watching the younger man, "You're partly right. The great men know where they're going; yes, and they get there, but surely it's a case of driving themselves without pause. If being true to oneself means ignoring the claims of other people then it simply doesn't work, does it? Your really great man knows what the end is, yes, and he doesn't turn aside from it, but all the way there he's reckoning with whatever—and whoever—else is in his way. He sees the whole thing as a pattern, and his own place in it."

I quoted, thinking back, "*I am involved in mankind?*"

"Exactly."

"What's that?" said Nigel.

"A quotation from John Donne, a poet who became Dean of St. Paul's. This comes in one of his Devotions. *No man is an island, entire of itself.* He's right. In the end, it's our place in the pattern that matters."

"Yes, but the artist?" said Nigel almost fiercely. "He's different, you know he is. He's driven by some compulsion: if he can't do what he knows he *has* to do with his life, he might as well be dead. Wouldn't he be justified in doing almost anything to fulfil himself, if his art were worth it in the end?"

"The end justifying the means? As a working principle, never," said Simon. "Never, never, never."

Nigel sat forward in his chair, his voice rising again with excitement, "I don't mean anything dreadful like murder or crime or something! But if there was no other way—"

I said, "What are you planning to do, for goodness' sake?"

He gave a sudden laugh that sounded very much to me like the edge of hysteria.

"What *is* it, Nigel?" asked Simon from the window-sill.

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For a moment I wondered just what was going to happen. Nigel stopped in mid movement, with the bottle in one hand. He was rigid. His face went redder, then white under the peeling sunburn. His ugly, spatulate fingers clenched round the bottle as if he was going to throw it. His eyes looked suffused. Then they fell away from Simon's, and he turned to set the bottle down. He said in a curiously muffled voice, " I'm sorry. I'm behaving badly. I was a bit high before you came in, that's all."

Then he turned back to me with one of his quick, angular movements that were like those of an awkward small boy. " I don't know what you must think, but things were getting me down a bit." He grinned shamefacedly at me, and I smiled back.

He went down on his knees, lugging a battered portfolio from under the bed. I noticed still that febrile air about him, and his hands were unsteady. " I'll show you my drawings," he said. " You can tell me if you think they're worth anything." He was dragging a sheaf of papers out of the portfolio.

" Here." He thrust a drawing into my hand. " That's one Simon talks about. And this." He sat back on his heels on the floor, and sent Simon a look that might almost have been hatred. " I'll be true to myself. You can be bloody sure I will. Even if it means being true to nobody else. I'm not involved with mankind, as your old poet puts it. I'm myself, Nigel Barlow. And some day you'll know it, you and all the rest. Do you hear? "

" I hear," said Simon peaceably. " Let's see what you've done, shall we? "

As I looked down at the drawings on my knee I was conscious of Nigel's fixed stare. I found myself hoping with ridiculous fervour that the drawings might be good.

They were. His touch was sure and strong, yet delicate. Each line was clean and definite and almost frighteningly effective; he had managed to suggest not only shape but bulk and texture by pure drawing with the minimum of fuss. Some were mere sketches, but over others he had taken greater pains.

I got up from my chair and sat down on the bed, spreading the drawings round me, studying them. I picked up one of them; it was the drawing of a clump of cyclamen springing from a small cleft in a bare rock. The textural differences of petal, leaf, and stone were beautifully indicated. Below the flowers, in the same cleft, grew the remains of some rock-plant that I remembered having seen everywhere in Greece; it was dead and dry-dusty, crumbling away against the rock. Above it the cyclamen's winged flowers looked pure and delicate and strong.

Over my shoulder Simon said, " Nigel, that's terrific. I haven't seen it before."

" Of course you haven't. I only did it today," said Nigel rudely, making a quick movement as if to snatch it back. Then he appeared to remember, as I had, that he'd told Simon he had done no work that day, for he flushed that raw red again and sat back on his heels looking uncomfortable.

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As usual, Simon took no notice. He lifted the drawing and studied it. "Did you mean to use colour in it? What made you change your mind?"

"Simply that there wasn't any water handy." And Nigel took the paper from him and put it back in the portfolio on the floor.

I said, rather quickly, "May I see the portraits?"

"Of course. Here they are—my bread and butter drawings." There was a curious note in his voice, and I saw Simon glance again at him, sharply.

There was a whole sheaf of portraits done in an entirely different style. This was effective in its way, the beautiful economy of his drawing telling even in the thick, dramatic, and over-emphatic line. His brilliance of execution had here become a slickness, the clever blending of a few stock statements into a formula. There was one fine-looking head that might have been Stephanos. Another portrait—more familiar in type to me and so possibly more alive—was that of a young woman with the Juliette Gréco gamine face, large lost eyes, and a sulky mouth. Beneath it was the drawing of a man's head that, again, seemed purely formal, but was oddly arresting.

The head was round, set on a powerful neck, and covered with close curls that grew low on the brow, like a bull's. The hair grew down thickly past the ears almost to the jawline, as one sees it in the heroic vase-paintings, and these sidepieces were drawn in formally, like the hard curls on a sculptured cheek. The upper lip was short, the lips thick, and drawn tightly up at the corners in the fixed half-moon smile that shows always on the statues of the archaic gods of Greece.

I said, "Simon, look at that. That's the real archaic smile. When you see it on crumbly old statues of Hermes and Apollo you think it's unreal and crude. But I've actually seen it on a man's face here in Greece."

"Is that new, too?" asked Simon.

"Which? Oh, that. Yes." Nigel gave him a quick upward glance, hesitated, then appeared to abandon his pretences, whatever they were. "I did it today." He took the drawing from me and studied it for a moment. "Perhaps you're right; it's too formal. I did it half from memory, and it's gone a bit too much like a vase-painting."

My hand was hovering over the Juliette Gréco girl.

Simon laughed. "That's real enough, and very western indeed," he said. "That's our one and only Danielle, isn't it, Nigel?"

"Danielle?" I said. "Oh, she *is* French, then? Somehow I thought she looked it."

Nigel had taken the drawing from Simon, and was stuffing that, too, away. He said in a muffled voice, "She was here as secretary to a chap attached to the School."

"The School?"

"Of archæology," said Simon. "They've been working here recently but they've had to pack up, because I believe funds gave

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out. Some of their workmen are still here tidying up—there are trucks and tools and what-have-you to be removed. But the archæologists have gone, more's the pity."

I saw Nigel throw him a sidelong glance, and remembered suddenly something that Simon had said to me earlier. "He's been here in Delphi a bit too long, and got tied up with a girl who wasn't very good for him."

I said, "Yes. I'd rather have liked to watch them at it. And think of the excitement if anything did turn up!"

He laughed. "*That* sort of excitement, I believe, is the rarest kind! After all, even the Charioteer—"

Nigel looked up. "The Charioteer?" His voice sounded cagey and queer. He was kneeling on the floor, shuffling the drawings in the folder into some sort of order.

"The Charioteer?" he repeated mechanically, as if his mind was on something else.

Simon drew on the cigarette. "Uh-huh. He wasn't dug up till 1896, long after the main shrines and treasuries had been excavated. Who knows what else is still up there in the odd corners under the trees?"

Nigel sat back on his heels, his hands moving clumsily among his sketches. He looked up now, the drawings spilling from his hands. "Simon." It was that strung-up voice again.

"Well?"

"I think I—" Then he stopped abruptly and turned his head. The studio's outer door had opened and shut with a bang. Rapid footsteps approached along the corridor.

To my surprise Nigel went white as a sheet. He swung round towards me, swept the rest of the drawings off the bed into an unceremonious heap, then hastily gathered them all together to shove back into the folder on the floor.

As unceremoniously, the door burst open.

A girl stood there, surveying the untidy and crowded little room with an expression of weary distaste. It was the girl of the portrait, gamine-look and all.

She drawled, without removing the cigarette from the corner of her mouth, "Hullo, Simon, my love. Hullo, Nigel. On your knees praying over my picture? Well, the prayer's answered. I've come back."

"Danielle—" Nigel made a clumsy movement towards her, but she evaded it.

She tilted her head back on its long neck and put out a hand towards Simon. Her fingernails were very long and very red. "Actually," she said in a bored velvet voice, "I'm Simon's girl. Aren't I, Simon?"

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★ ***The third part of My Brother Michael by Mary Stewart appears in next month's ARGOSY***

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Solution on Page 101

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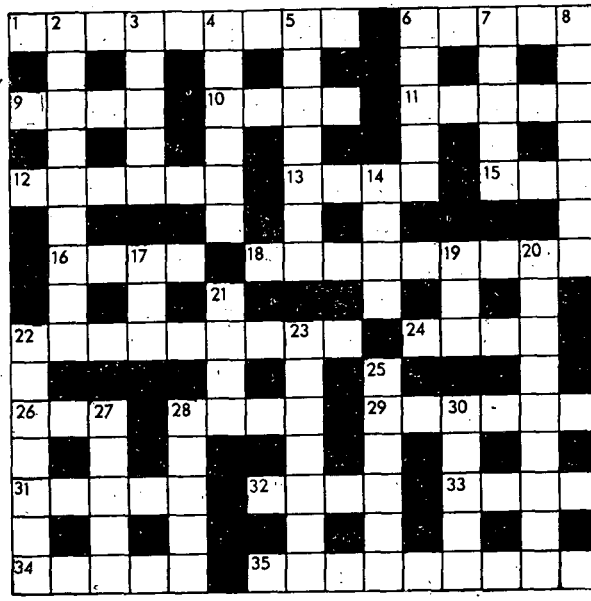

CLUES

Across

1 Treasury tipple? (4, 5).

6 Brush and its use (5).

9 Equine wine (4).

10 A wooden actor? (4).

11 *In*sult or in*sult* (5).

12 Haggard's *She* had to be this (6).

13 Rhythm of closing (4).

15 Common to journeys and wits (3).

16 A sup, spilt, makes a dangerous tree (4).

18 Does it go round a brass hat? (5, 4).

22 A little publicity he hires to gain fans? (9).

24 Ocular flower (4).

26 Really, half of it's a cathedral (3).

28 Barrel's a target (4).

29 Vinous prelate (6).

31 Once more, a profit (5).

32 Low for singer, high for relief (4).

33 I order: "The same again." (4).

34 Let ox turn to praise (5).

35 Shakespearian king, not disc-jockey (9).

Down

2 Rigorous metallic leap (9).

3 Imperial wine is more than all right (5).

4 A penny in oneness and it's a mess (6).

5 German prince or British voter (7).

6 A slippery fish, indeed! (5).

7 The way's a flight to the East (5).

8 Whisky may be single or this (7).

14 An imperative in wine-making (4).

17 Drink like a fish (3).

19 Not the place for moaning (3).

20 Has the wise old man done some feathering? (9).

21 Biblical road hog (4).

22 Chemical looks like champion gallery (7).

23 Entirely a little drink with a friend (7).

25 Swallow sailor's globe (6).

27 Confused as yet, it'll start a ferment (5).

28 Forbid nearly everything? How dull! (5).

30 All the same, it's the thing for spirits (5).

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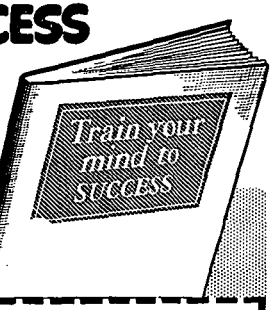

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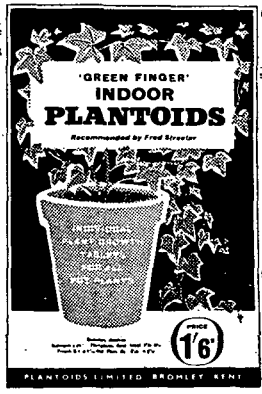

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